

***Creation fulfilled and the Book of Revelation:
Some questions about order, disorder and the “apocalyptic” genre***

(Contribution for a workshop on Apocalypse and Hope held in Palo Alto on 19th November 2018)

Thank you very much indeed for allowing me to take part with you in this workshop. I'm a theologian of classic temperament and systematic interests, so one for whom the matters under discussion are confessional, i.e. being studied from within. They are part of what Alison McQueen has properly focused in on as the development and sharing of an *imaginary* by which people live¹. As such, it is a privilege to eavesdrop on uses of theological language and themes as they are taken up on the inside of different fields and woven into current discussions of catastrophism, the effect of our nuclear potentialities on our imagination and other changes in our world seen as threatening, alarming, or devastating, contingent or inevitable. Sometimes, for a systematic theologian, the ways in which theological terms are used in different disciplines sound like a strangely narrow orchestration of a much richer symphony. Sometimes, on the other hand, such as when reading Alison's book, I'm amazed at how a common internal logic seems to assert itself over time.

I'd like to start by bringing attention to a fairly new reading of the book of Revelation, that of Margaret Barker². This is in fact a very ancient reading, but one for which the relevant intellectual tools had been lost from sight for centuries. Barker shows that what we call apocalyptic language, and the world of visions, angels and tribulations which it includes, are derivations from the Temple Visions of the first Temple as used and kept alive by priestly writers in the second Temple period. These authors, in their varied groups, were protesting, among other things, the sort of religion the formerly-exiled “Judahites” had brought back with them from Babylon. The visions included memories of, and prophecies concerning, the anointed Priest-King whose cult had been central in Solomon's Temple. For these protestors, the second Temple was impure, and Jerusalem no longer a holy city. To quote Barker “The harlot of the book of Revelation was not Rome; she had been Jerusalem since the time of Ezekiel, even though later interpreters of the prophecy identified Rome as the harlot of their own time”.

¹ Alison McQueen's text, which formed the centrepiece of the workshop at which she was present, was: A. McQueen *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018. In the company of various respondents, I was invited to comment on the earlier chapters of the book where she discusses the Jewish and Christian background to apocalyptic thought.

² M. Barker *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2000

Among the evidence for this reading is the way in which the same incidents are described in the chapters leading up to the overthrowing of the harlot as are described by Josephus in his account of the siege of Jerusalem, though obviously with very different language. However the reason for my bringing this out is not so much to engage in exegesis of the text of the book of Revelation. It is to bring out a key point about the loss of the relevant intellectual tools concerning the language and images involved. We call this language and these images “apocalyptic” because our principal source of such language over the centuries has been the book of the “Apocalypse”, by which is meant the Revelation, the uncovering, given by Jesus to John. So for us the language and imagery are known to us by association with the book which made them familiar to us, and we look backward from that book to Second Temple “apocalyptic”, and forward into mediaeval and modern history from the same book. However, if Barker’s take is true, and it seems to me better than any other explanation I’ve read, the language is most appropriately moored to the Temple. In this understanding, the first Temple, King Solomon’s Temple, functions as type. The second Temple, more or less frequently, functions as anti-type because it is seen as a counter example of what the Temple should be, having been set up by corrupt priests and their families who had “refused Wisdom” and become blind. Finally, there is envisaged a Temple-less future. Here a huge Holy of Holies (whose every side is about 1500 miles long³) has become co-extensive with a Temple-less city⁴ as the in-coming fulfilment of what the purpose of the Temple had been about all along. The language then is visionary, rather than what we call “apocalyptic”, starting with the Holy of Holies vision of Isaiah 6, working through Ezekiel’s Throne and Temple visions⁵, and on to Daniel’s⁶. The elements we call “apocalyptic” are very much there - plagues, beasts, and so on -, dominating our attention by their outlandishness. But they are a quite specific subset of the central Temple vision.

All this would help to explain why the language and the imagery of the Book of Revelation so quickly became opaque and difficult to understand. For it requires intimate knowledge of the working of the Temple, its principal feasts, and the priestly imagination which was kept alive simply by the regular participation of family groups, the 24 so-called “priestly courses” established by Solomon, in keeping the whole system going. We know, for instance, that both John the Baptist and John the Beloved Disciple were members of such families. Yet, within a generation of the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70 there was no one with a living memory of the day to day working of the Temple. Fairly certainly the

³ Rev 21: 15-21

⁴ Rev 21:22

⁵ Ez 1:4-28; Ez 8:1-16; Ez 40-48

⁶ Daniel 7

translators into Greek of the original Hebrew or Aramaic text behind the book as we have it now had already lost that imaginary to some degree, since in a number of places they misunderstood, or supplied the wrong vowels to, the original word which they then translate accordingly – so we get a name upon a “thigh” rather than upon a “banner”, and on several occasions we get “lo, another angel” for “then the (same) angel”. However, with the Temple imaginary considerably restored (and this has been Barker’s work over the last several decades), we now have access to a much richer sense of what is going on in the text.

I’m going to beg your indulgence to allow me to give you a very brief overview of this Temple imaginary, (by which I mean the world of images, associations, practices and narratives which structure and give sense to a shared imagination), not merely for its own sake, but because I hope you will see that it is germane to the whole question of the relationship between order and disorder which seemed to me to be at the centre of both Alison McQueen’s discussion, and of previous discussions which scholars of the thought of René Girard, such as those participating here, Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Wolfgang Palaver in particular, have been having over the last decades.

The first point to stress, since it is both obvious and at the same time arcane, is that the Hebrew cult was and is massively Creator-oriented. And everything to do with the Temple was oriented in this same way. The Temple itself was considered to be a microcosm of Creation. This issued forth from the Holy of Holies and moved outwards through the various courts. The Holy of Holies, a perfect cube, was considered to be “outside”, “before” Creation where only God is, along with God’s holy angels and Wisdom, a feminine divinity or aspect of divinity with whom God then created all that is. By definition, this was “before” space and time. Standard ways of referring to this “day zero” included phrases like “before the foundation of the world” as well as “for ever and ever”, “in saecula saeculorum” and so forth. In the Temple imaginary, moving outwards from the Holy of Holies, material creation started at the Temple veil. This seamless veil, supported on four acacia columns meant the beginnings of materiality, and if you were to move outwards from the Holy Place through the veil you would be entering into material creation. First you would find the lampstand, indicating the lights, and the first day, and thereafter other statues and signs indicating the different days of creation familiar to us from the book of Genesis, until, moving further out you would reach humans.

It was understood that everything that was “really real” to use sloppy language (and the Temple imaginary preceded Plato by several hundred years⁷) was with the Creator, and that everything on our side of the veil, as it were, participated, to some extent, in that reality since Wisdom had brought it into being precisely so that it might sing out the glory of God. Thus, created reality, everything that we know, means secondary reality, a copy, imitation, or image, of the primary reality. A copy which, when all is well, aligns with the real through worship, and through humans, and particularly priests, being endowed with wisdom, and thus performing well here below the things that are fully performed in heaven. We get a sense of this, when, in Revelation “the sky is rolled up like a scroll”: we are on the inside of a way of talking about a secondary reality.

The two central feasts of the first Temple consisted of the enthronement, or Ascension, of the anointed priestly ruler figure, in the image of Solomon (who had been crowned King and God), and the Feast of the Atonement. The latter ancient rite, long predating any of the lists of sins for which we assume it to have atoned, was far more weighted towards the unbinding, or renewing, of *Creation* than anything else. The idea behind it was that in a world created, and orchestrated into being by God and God’s Wisdom, everything points towards, sings out, reflects, gives off, the glory of God; and those in whom Wisdom makes her dwelling are able to see this. However, over time, the cumulative effects of human transgression cause everything that *is* to become inflected by vanity, or futility. Things no longer point to what is beyond them, and seem to wind down in entropy, dully going nowhere in particular, not quite hitting the mark; and humans too become blind and bound down in boredom and a sense of dissatisfaction. The rite of the Atonement was the moment when the Creator would come into creation (as Anointed High Priest bearing the name YHWH on his person) offering himself in sacrifice (as a lamb) so as to unblock all the blocked flows of things, disentangle all the entangled links of things, unbind all the bound-down things and people, cover over and protect the Creator’s chosen ones, and threaten requital against their enemies, finally banishing Azazel (as identical lamb or goat) to the desert or the deep. Thus was the whole of Creation made glory-bearing, utterly alive, once again, and the sightedness of Wisdom restored to all.

Please remember that the key element to the understanding of these rituals was that what we might participate in here below, the ritual event in the Temple, was not the real thing. The real thing was already lived out in heaven. And visions given to priests and prophets concerned elements of that which was already unspeakably

⁷ Plato’s *Timaeus* recounts prior Pythagorean understandings whose similarity to those found in Ezekiel, Job and other Biblical texts have long been noted. Cf M. Barker “Temple and Timaeus” in *The Great High Priest* London: T&T Clark 2003

full, outside time, space and narrative possibility in heaven. That fulness had been glimpsed by prophets and priests such as Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel⁸ as something that was on its way in, was coming into the world and would eventually arrive as the terrible “day of the Lord” of which Zechariah speaks⁹ and which would lead to the end of the Temple. What we have in the book of the Apocalypse is the account of how that fulness, emerging from the Holy Place, interacts with time-structured sequential earthly reality in the form of the coming of Jesus, his teaching, his death and resurrection and the outworking of his prophecies concerning the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D.70. So the “fulness” starts to become comprehensible as a series of human narratives, dependent on time and place. Each of the seven “seals” opened by the slain-and-risen Lamb is a dimension of that narrative interaction between heavenly reality and earthly turbulence.

Because the fulness is greater than any single human event can describe, the human realities involved can be superimposed one upon another. So at Jesus’ death in, let us say, 28 AD he pronounces the word “It is accomplished¹⁰”. The loud voice which comes out of the Temple, from the Throne, as the seventh angel pours his bowl into the air in 70 AD says “It is done¹¹.” These are both that same word as its fulness reaches its maximal impact in human affairs. The same can be said for persecutions from the Maccabean period and those of the years immediately prior to AD70 – the same beasts with horns could be seen at work with different imperial “drag” – Hellenistic or Roman. As at the time of Daniel the same beast could be the Greeks, or the Assyrians or the Babylonians. And it is this that allowed later readers, particularly after the Reformation, to imagine incidences of the same fulness applying to Rome, with its topographical seven hills, as had already been applied to Jerusalem, whose description as being built on seven hills was a traditional reference to its perfection rather than an unwarranted geographical claim, seven being the number of perfection.

However, to matters closer to our study day. I’d like to make just a very few points about whose enmeshment with our topic for the day I hope to learn more by listening to you.

The first is that the central reality in the book of Revelation, the heavenly vision of the lamb standing as one slain who is empowered to open the seals, indicates the fulness of the Atonement having already been carried out “before the foundation

⁸ Loc.cit in footnotes 4 and 5 supra

⁹ Esp. Zech 12-14, with particular attention to Zech 14:4, a reference to the Messiah coming on the Mount of Olives. Hence the desirability, to this day, for pious Jews of being buried close to the Mount of Olives.

¹⁰ Jn 19:30

¹¹ Rev 16:17

of the world”. Everything else flows from that, for the beast Azazel who is finally cast into oblivion just before the end of the book is the beast for whom the second lamb – the one we refer to as the scapegoat – did duty in the rite of Atonement¹². But all this imagery has as its point to bring out that creation has finally been completed, fulfilled, and the project of the Creator finally realised. All this has taken place and been brought to completion. And that fulness and completion is being worked out, slowly but surely on earth. I stress this, since we are inclined to separate “Creation” and “Redemption” into something which happened in the distant past (Creation), setting up order; and something coming along in the middle of time (Redemption) restoring an order which has somehow been broken. It is easy for us to attribute each “moment” to a different “person” of the Holy Trinity such that Creation is the work of the Father and Redemption the work of the Son in a way which is frankly ditheistic. All of this causes us to miss the main thing that is happening in the book of Revelation. This is that the fulness of creation has already been instantiated, inaugurated in the midst of a series of historical acts (Redemption) which are now over. All the turbulences and so forth are distractions.

For instance, the whole point of the series of plagues which come upon the earth is that they “exhaust God’s wrath”: in other words these are the plagues promised at the end of Leviticus as punishment for the unfaithfulness of the people¹³. But there will be no more. That is over. This is a narrator’s way to make a metaphysical point. You don’t say “God does not punish” you say “God exhausted – brought to an end forever¹⁴ – God’s punishment” through these plagues which fulfil Leviticus. Rather than make the metaphysical claim that “there is no violence or vengeance in God” instead you tell an ironic story. In this you start by saying “The Lion of Judah has conquered”, but when you look, the one referred to as Lion of Judah is standing as a slain lamb, and later all the violence is described as “the wrath of the lamb”. Anyone can understand the wrath of a triumphant lion, but the wrath flowing from a lamb is clearly a subversion from within of what is meant by wrath, especially as the lamb has been slaughtered. Such irony is made to measure for the Girardian reading where the innocent victim, once revealed as such, undoes the capacity to maintain order by violence, which in turn leads to violence with nowhere obvious to go, since sacrifice no longer works at the transcendent level, and never will again. So the violence goes to scapegoating, which becomes visible as such to those participating, and can no longer be resolved by sacrifice, but only by change of heart.

¹² Leviticus 16:8-10

¹³ Leviticus 26:14-39 cf also Dt 31:16 – 32, 48

¹⁴ Rev 15:1

So the Creator, for whom the beginning and the end (Α and Ω) are the same, has completed creation in the midst of all the evil and turbulence which was present in the events leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple and the sacking of Jerusalem. What is central to this vision is that *we not be distracted*. It was this that was central to Jesus' own teachings in the passage that is referred to as "the little Apocalypse" in Mark's Gospel¹⁵ and its synoptic parallels¹⁶. There the destruction of the Temple is prophesied, and wars, revolutions, turbulence, plague and famine all foretold. But the central part of the teaching is: do not allow your heads to be turned by all this, avert your gaze, do not attribute any sort of divine significance to any of this. Leave, run away, don't get caught up in it all. The real coming of the son of man will be like a thief in the night, when you are not expecting it, so be vigilant. Jesus then says that no one knows whether he will come in the evening, at midnight, or at cock-crow, or in the morning¹⁷. In this way, notoriously, he gives the structure of the events that will start in a few days, with his handing himself over to the disciples in the Last Supper (in the evening), his being handed over by Judas at midnight, his being betrayed (handed over) by Peter at cock-crow, and his being handed over by the Sanhedrin to the Romans in the morning.

What I'm claiming, I suppose, is that both in the Gospels and in the book of Revelation, what we have is something other than the binary world presupposed by students of "apocalyptic" (who rightly point out the many binaries present in this literature: heaven-earth, insider-outsider, light-darkness, purity-impurity and so forth). Rather the imaginary is ternary in just such a way as binary thinkers can't see. The third point being something emergent. It is as though everyone is so preoccupied with the fortunes, amidst significant wind and waves, of flotillas of small boats which are involved in skirmishes with each other, that they don't perceive the slow emergence of a huge submarine in the midst of them, whose slow emergence has had, as an unintended consequence, the creation of a series of waves, eddies and currents such that the boats, fully concerned with their game, were unaware of the game-changer in their midst.

As Alison McQueen says, we don't know how Tyconius¹⁸ read Revelation, but Augustine may well have been involved in much less of a backward flip when he downplayed the significance of the Fall of Rome than might be thought. The book of Revelation understands quite well that time has come to an end with the fall of

¹⁵ Mk 13

¹⁶ Mt 24, Lk 21:5-36

¹⁷ Mark 13:35-7

¹⁸ Tyconius was a moderate Donatist theologian from North Africa (active 370-390 AD). He wrote an exposition of the book of Revelation which is thought to have influenced Augustine, and which is now lost to us except in as far as quotes from it remain in the works of other writers (including Augustine). Ref in McQueen p 46 note 126

Jerusalem, that violence and evil has lost all transcendence for ever (the vision of that in Revelation is clearly the same as Jesus' vision in St Luke's Gospel¹⁹ which gave René one of his book titles), even if, like a tail separated from a lizard, it continues to thrash around for a time. The book understands that there will never again be a genuinely holy city, Jerusalem's former role, with its Temple and the oppressive economic structure that kept it going. That role has been tied to a millstone and cast into the sea. The millstone imagery is the narrators way of saying "utterly lost and annihilated without remains" as opposed to simply being buried, where remains could be discovered and might even be reanimated.

There are now two simultaneous valencies of what we call time. In the first of these, creation opens us up to an already inaugurated eternity, life on the inside of which involves being stretched by hope as we learn to build each other up as we discover what really *is* – what the adventure of being created really looks like. All the while we resist allowing ourselves to be distracted by the idolatry of meaning attached to apparently significant events. This is why "resisting the evil one" means the same thing as "not resisting evil", for part of the distractive glamour of the evil one is that he inclines us to derive meaning and identity from involvement in "resisting evil", when all that does is to turn us into the mirror image of a mirage. Instead, patience, perseverance and witnessing to truth without concern for loss are paramount. Meanwhile, in the second of these two valencies, we have the binary time of futility, violence and disorder with its fake goodness, fake badness, fake meaning and so on, all of which mean nothing at all, and are always winding down in vanity.

I think I am right in saying that it is this quality of time following the fall of Jerusalem which Augustine identified as the "secular", one in which two quite different, and incommensurable, sorts of thing are going on simultaneously: the coming of the Kingdom visible only by occasional sign; and the winding down of time into entropy.

The final issue which I'd like to bring out from this understanding of the relationship between the celestial (outside of time and space) and the earthly realms is one where I really need your help. If I am right (and I know that I lack the philosophical dexterity to describe this properly), we have in Revelation an account of how Creation and Atonement are the same thing²⁰. This seems inconceivable given that we tend to imagine "being" as prior to any "falling from being" which might need repairing. So typically, in classical Christian accounts, creation comes

¹⁹ Lk 10:17-20 cf Rev 12:7-12

²⁰ I'm especially grateful to Anthony Bartlett in his article "After Sacrifice Ontology: The Shared Revelatory Dynamic of Heidegger and Girard" in *Contagion* Vol 24 2017 pp119-138 for helping me to think this through.

first and then atonement comes second, the first as the prior reality, establishing order, and the second as an ancillary reality, presupposing disorder and working to restore it. Yet in fact what I am describing suggests the simultaneity of creation and atonement, somewhat helped by the fact that the Hebrew verb in question “to create new” and “to renew” are the same verb - chadash²¹.

However, something more is implied by this in the way in which we deal with, and think about, order and disorder, with the two coming into being (different sorts of being) at the same time. If Creation and Atonement are the same thing (which is presupposed by the New Testament texts referring to Jesus as Creator²², as well as by Paul’s account of “creation subjected to futility” until its sons can be revealed²³), then atonement is the nearest thing we have to an analogy for creation. There is, by definition, no human activity that is strictly analogous to Creation: even biblical analogies are obviously fraught, like that of the potter and the clay. Even the language of speaking (“And God said” in Genesis), while enormously more sophisticated and subtle as an image (speaking something into being) doesn’t offer insight into the relationship between order and disorder. However, we come to see Atonement, the way in which the Anointed One gave himself up to death in the midst of violence, as a way of opening up to fulness an unachieved order. That order was the one genuinely but futilely created by the surrogate victim mechanism. All of this is *an analogous account of how the Creator brings into being*. It requires us to hold two dynamic movements, each opposed to the other, but not on the same level as each other, one emergent and one dispersive, as simultaneously forming a single dynamic.

What does the relationship between order and disorder in the human *polis* look like in this repristinated “apocalyptic” form?

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²¹ It is not surprising that what was probably the original end of the book of Revelation (21:5 in the current ordering) has the One sitting on the throne saying “Behold I make all things new”, translated by “chadash” in modern Hebrew versions of the New Testament.

²² For instance, John 1:1-3; Heb 1:1-4; Col 1:15-17;

²³ Romans 8:18-23