

The Great Apocalyptic Mistake

The prevalent interpretation of the Apocalypse presents it as a book whose primary aim was to offer encouragement and hope to the Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman imperial authorities at the time it was written, towards the end of the first century AD.

Interpreted in this way, the reign of the beast and his false prophet (Rev ch. 13) is identified with the reign of one or other of the Roman emperors of that time, and the city called 'Babylon' (chs.17-18) is identified with the ancient imperial city of Rome. This historical or 'preterist' interpretation of the Apocalypse, as it is called, is the one favoured by the majority of modern scholars as the explanation of the precise, or literal, meaning of the text, and is the one presented in most of the commentaries, including those published in the Bibles most frequently used by Catholics (e.g. the Jerusalem Bible, the New American Bible, la Biblia Latinoamericana).

After establishing that the Apocalypse deals primarily with the struggle of the Christians in the first century, the majority of scholars observe that this historical situation does not completely exhaust the meaning of the book; they agree that, interpreted in a spiritual way (i.e., non-literally), the Apocalypse continues to be valuable as a source of inspiration and encouragement for Christian life in every age. In brief, we are led to understand that the enigma of this last book in the Bible has been thoroughly explained, and that there is little more to add.

However, if we study the historical situation of the Christians who were persecuted in the first century, and compare this situation with the visions of the Apocalypse which are said to represent it, we certainly do not find a convincing correspondence.

For example, a persecution as severe or diffuse as the one described in the Apocalypse (7,9-17; 13,5-10) never took place in the first few centuries of the history of the Church. The persecutors never performed miracles in order to induce the people to worship an image of the emperor, nor did they ever try to control them by giving them a mark, without which they could not buy or sell (13,11-17). Never did a Roman emperor destroy his imperial city in the definitive way the beast and his allies destroy the city called 'Babylon', according to the description in the Apocalypse (17,15-17; ch. 18). There has never been environmental damage on the scale described after the blowing of the first four trumpets in the visions recorded by St. John (ch. 8), nor has there ever been a ministry of two prophets like the one described between the blowing of the sixth and seventh trumpets (11,3-13).

It should also be noticed that the only part of the Apocalypse which is explicitly concerned with the situation that prevailed around the time it was written (chs. 2-3), hardly mentions the problem of persecution: in the letters to the churches only one persecution is predicted, of brief duration and limited to a few people (2,10), and there is only one passing reference to a martyr (2,13).

It is also significant that the Fathers of the Church did not interpret the Apocalypse as a book which addressed itself primarily to the Church of their times; the interpretation that prevailed in the first three centuries presented the Apocalypse as a prophecy of the concluding period of history, that is to say, as an eschatological prophecy which complements the other passages in the Bible concerning the end of time.

In view of the lack of references to, or quotations from, the Apocalypse in the writings of the early Church (until at least 60 years after it was said to have written according to R.H. Charles), it is even probable that the first readers understood very little of St. John's book. As evidence of this, several Fathers of the Church confessed that they did not understand the Apocalypse (e.g., St. Jerome, St. Dionysius of Alexandria). Furthermore, St Dionysius (c. 250 AD) is quoted as saying: "Some indeed of those before our time rejected and altogether impugned the book, examining it chapter by chapter and declaring it to be unintelligible and illogical, and its title false. For they say that it is not John's, no, nor even an apocalypse (unveiling), since it is veiled by its great thick curtain of unintelligibility". These comments are clear indications that the principal message of the book could not have been directed to the persecuted Church of that period.

This conclusion is further strengthened by the fact that the Apocalypse was not received as quickly or widely as one would have expected if it had been generally understood to refer to the contemporary situation. In fact, in the Eastern Church, the text was not accepted into the canon until at least the 6th or 7th century, and although it was included much earlier into the canon of the Western Church, its acceptance was by no means unopposed (by Marcion, the Alogi, Gaius of Rome). A Cambridge scholar at the turn of the last century (H.B. Swete) remarked that "no book in the New Testament with so good a record, was so long in gaining general acceptance".

Far from confirming the 'preterist' interpretation, then, historical evidence actually indicates that the Apocalypse remained largely unappreciated by the Early Church as a whole. With the possible exception of the first three chapters, which contain messages for the seven local churches in Asia, the Early Church does not appear to have understood St John's visions to refer to her contemporary situation.

By attributing to the text a meaning which it clearly did not have at the time of its composition, but was the product of later developments, the 'preterist' interpretation can not be considered the result of sound exegesis, but rather an example of what is called eisegesis, or accommodation. In other words, it is the result of projecting on to the text a meaning that is quite foreign to it.

With so many indications against the interpretation of the Apocalypse as a book written primarily for the Church at the start of her historical mission, it is surely right to ask ourselves how this interpretation ever came to be so well established and publicized, especially in the Catholic Church. The answer is that this interpretation is the product of a very highly esteemed application of the

historico-critical method of exegesis.

By means of an analysis of the historical situation and of the historical processes which led to the formation of ancient texts, the historico-critical method has been of great value in clarifying the precise, or literal, meaning of a great part of Sacred Scripture. With respect to the Apocalypse, however, this application of the method departs from the assumption that the entire book was planned to respond to the needs of the Church under persecution at the end of the first century. It is an assumption which restricts, and limits, the principal meaning of the Apocalypse to the situation which prevailed at the time it was written.

In fact, it is actually in the making of this assumption that the limits of the historico-critical method become evident, as recognized by the Pontifical Biblical Commission: "Certainly, the classical use of the historico-critical method reveals certain limits, since it restricts the search for the meaning of a biblical text to the historical circumstances which produced it, and is not concerned with the other possible meanings which have arisen in the course of time following biblical revelation, during the history of the Church" (The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, 1993).

Since the Apocalypse embraces such a vast horizon - nothing less than the complete fulfilment of the entire mystery of God at the end of time (cf. Rev 10,7) - it is not surprising that the limits of the historico-critical method become particularly apparent when the method is applied to the interpretation of this book. Owing to these limits, the 'preterist' interpretation of the Apocalypse offers an understanding of the book which, as we have seen, does not arrive at explaining the precise or literal meaning of the text.

Furthermore, the presentation of the Apocalypse as a modest product of its time contrasts strikingly with the presentation of the book in its own words: as the revelation given by God Himself to Jesus Christ, and communicated by means of a mystical encounter between His angel and St. John, in order to inform the Church about events which must take place in the future (cf. 1,1-2; 22,6.16). It is from this contrast that we can perceive the fundamental mistake of the 'preterist' interpretation: it ignores the divine authenticity of the Apocalypse and interprets the statements confirming this as if they were a literary invention of the human author. There follows, naturally, a disconcerting underestimation of the value of this book.

All this indicates that a thorough re-evaluation of the St. John's Apocalypse is required, employing an approach that does not impose artificial limitations on its scope or significance. Respecting the words of the text itself, the correct approach should start with a knowledge of mystical theology rather than Roman history.