

Eating the Little Scroll

The image of eating a little scroll is familiar to us as a metaphor for *'lectio divina'*, that is to say reading, understanding, contemplating and assimilating the contents of Scripture, with the help of prayer. The result of this practice, we hope, is to bring our lives closer to the divine Will, by causing a change in our attitudes and behaviour. What kind of change in our attitudes or behaviour can we hope for, if we perform *lectio divina* on the very passage of Scripture in which we find this image? This passage is to be found in chapter 10 of the Apocalypse of John, but before studying it in detail, it is necessary to consider its setting in the series of visions described by St. John.

After the opening vision of the angel of the Lord standing among seven golden lampstands, the author describes his ascent 'in the spirit' to the throne of God in heaven. There he sees the Christ, represented as a Lamb, taking a sealed scroll from God and receiving worship from the whole of creation. Christ proceeds to break the seals one by one, and when all the seals have been broken, there is a period of silence whilst the prayers of the saints are heard. The silence is broken by a series of trumpet-blasts, and during this time the author finds himself back on the earth and again confronted by the angel of the Lord. The angel has a little open scroll in his hand and swears that God's mysterious plan for mankind is about to be fulfilled. The author of the Apocalypse is then told: *"Go, take the open scroll which is in the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the land. And I went towards the angel telling him to give me the little scroll. And he says to me: Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey. And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey, and when I swallowed it my stomach was made bitter. And they say to me: You must prophesy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers"* (Rev 10,8-11).

With this passage, we find ourselves at a pause between the two halves of the book, a point to which the first half of the book has been converging, and from which the second half unfolds. Here, at the heart of St. John's book, we come to a new beginning - a beginning which is all the more significant because it is reflected in the opening words of the entire text: *"The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place, and which he made known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness to the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus Christ, to the extent of all that he saw"* (Rev 1,1-2). Since the way in which the Revelation passes from God to Jesus Christ and then by his angel to St. John is the subject of the text up to this point, we should prepare ourselves for the main message of the book - the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the reference to our passage in the opening lines of the text suggests that it is here, at the centre of the book, that we come at last to the true beginning of the Revelation.

Returning to our passage in the Apocalypse, the first thing we notice is that eating the little scroll had a powerful effect on the author, and a specific result. Despite leaving a sweet taste in his mouth, it made his stomach bitter, and prepared him to 'prophesy again' about many races and nations and tongues and rulers. Recalling the description of the Ezekiel's prophetic vocation in the Old Testament (Ezek 2,9 - 3,4), the whole event can be understood as the preparation of the author for a renewal of prophetic activity. The significance of this can be explored by examining the context of the passage in more detail.

Our passage sits in the interval between the blowing of the sixth and seventh trumpets, two events in a series of liturgical actions described by St. John, starting with the

heavenly ascension of Christ the Lamb and concluding with the fulfilment of God's plan for mankind at the End of the Age. From the text immediately preceding the eating of the little scroll by St. John, we discover that "*in the days of the blowing of the seventh angel, whenever he is going to blow, also will have been fulfilled the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets*" (Rev 10,7). The author's experience of eating the little scroll and his commission to 'prophecy again', are related to the time immediately preceding the eschatological fulfilment of God's mysterious plan for mankind - a time that is signified in the text by the blowing of the seventh and last trumpet. It follows that the prophecy that St. John receives by eating the little scroll concerns the final, or eschatological, period of history, and that the author of the Apocalypse, himself, is here being commissioned as the prophet of the last days - the eschatological prophet. As a result of eating the little scroll, the author becomes personally involved in the events of the final period of history.

The author's personal involvement with the final period of history is specified in the text which immediately follows our passage. After being told he must prophecy again, St. John continues: "*And a cane similar to a rod was given to me while saying: Get up and measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping in it. And reject the court which is outside the Sanctuary and do not measure it, because it was given to the nations, and they will trample the Holy City for 42 months*" (Rev 11,1-2).

This new assignment can be interpreted by reading the command 'to measure the Sanctuary, the altar and those worshipping in it' as a continuation of the preceding statement regarding the author's obligation 'to prophecy again'. In other words, the act of measuring he was commanded to perform consists in witnessing the prophecy he received as a result of eating the little scroll.

St. John started to perform this task by writing the prophecy in the book known as the Apocalypse and sending it to the churches. Every time the prophecy is witnessed by the Church, or by its members, St. John is carrying out the task entrusted to him. In this way, St. John continues to have an effective and enduring presence in the Church, even though he died long ago. This real, but invisible, presence of the author of the Apocalypse recalls a particularly enigmatic passage in the gospel of John, concerning the future of the beloved disciple: "*When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus: Lord what about this man? Jesus said to him: If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me! The saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but: If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?*" (Jn 21, 21-23). I would like to suggest that the author's enduring presence not only fulfils Jesus's prediction about the beloved disciple, but also identifies John, the author of the Apocalypse, with the same beloved disciple.

We are left wondering why St. John was asked to measure the Temple and its parts when in fact he simply had to witness the prophecy he received as a result of eating the little scroll. Just as St. John's presence is real but not physical, so the task given to him is also real but not physical; in other words, his spiritual presence accomplishes a spiritual task. It follows that doing the measuring for the Temple is the spiritual meaning of witnessing the prophecy. The measuring-rod is therefore a symbol for the prophecy that the author received in order 'to prophecy again', the act of measuring corresponds to the act of witnessing the prophecy, and the Sanctuary, the altar and those worshipping there, are the components of the new Temple of God which is in process of construction.

There is a certain ambiguity about the nature of this Temple. Ezekiel's prophecy gave actual ground-plans and measurements for the construction of the future messianic Temple (Ezek chs. 40-43). In St. John's instruction, however, the prophecy itself is the

measuring-rod, or rule, according to which the components of the new Temple are shaped and assembled, and the act of prophesying corresponds to the act of measuring. It is clear, then that we are no longer dealing with a material Temple built of concrete and stones, but a dwelling for God formed of people who are responsive to the words of the prophecy. The components of the new Temple refer to those people who accept the prophecy given to John as the rule for their membership of God's people, and adjust their lives accordingly. By the same reasoning, those who reject the prophecy correspond to those who the author is told to reject and not to measure. They cease to be members of God's people. We begin to sense the importance of St. John's prophecy in determining precisely who is a member of God's people - a role which corresponds to the authentic function of a 'canon' and has profound ecumenical implications.

We noted earlier that St. John began his task of measuring when he wrote his prophecy and sent it to the churches, but we have not yet considered when he will have completed this work. The identification of the act of prophesying with the act of measuring suggests an answer. The realization of the prophecy brings with it the completion of the task of measuring, which in turn indicates the completion of the process of construction. In other words, the new Temple of God will not be complete until the prophecy, which St. John received by eating the little scroll, will have been fulfilled. The first event announced in this prophecy is described as follows: "*And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for 1,260 days dressed in sackcloth*" (Rev 11,3). It is therefore the public mission of these two witnesses, or prophets, that indicates the start of the realization of St. John's prophecy. Furthermore, by publicly announcing the content of this prophecy, the two witnesses also help to fulfil the task of measuring entrusted to St. John.

The results or effects of the eating of the little scroll are therefore extremely significant. By this means, St. John receives an eschatological prophecy which forms the central message of the Apocalypse and will be publicly announced at a certain time by two witnesses of the Lord. Acceptance of this prophecy not only defines the true people of God but also instructs them how to proceed to the completion of God's dwelling on earth. At the same time, rejection of the prophecy leads to exclusion from God's people. With such a critical role in the fulfilment of God's plan for mankind, we may wonder about the origin of this prophecy, or more specifically, of the little scroll which generated it.

The opening lines of the Apocalypse (Rev 1,1-2) refer to the transmission of the Revelation from God to Jesus Christ, and from Jesus to John by means of an angel, and this corresponds, as we have already noted, to those events described in the first half of the text which lead up to the eating of the little scroll by St. John: Christ the Lamb ascends to heaven, receives a sealed scroll from God and when he has broken all its seals, he sends his angel to John with a little open scroll and John eats it. Although it is not stated openly, it is implied that there is a close relation between the sealed scroll received by Christ from God and the little scroll swallowed by John.

With the information given to us in the text, we should not jump to the conclusion that the sealed scroll received and opened by Christ is the exactly the same as the little open scroll given to John. Several references in the text describe the scroll given to Christ as 'the scroll of life from the foundation of the world' (Rev 13,8; 17,8), which is opened at the final judgement (20,12) and contains the names of those who will be able to enter the Holy City after the final judgement (21,27). Those whose names are missing from this scroll can not expect to be saved from eternal perdition (20,15). If this scroll were the same as the little open scroll that *was eaten* by St. John, it could not afterwards be used as the key document at the final judgement. Elsewhere in the text it is indicated that, before the final judgement, Christ has the authority to erase and therefore remove names from this scroll

(3,5), but presumably he is not able to do this until he has broken all its seals and opened it. Since this is precisely the point at which the little open scroll is transmitted to the author of the Apocalypse, it is quite probable that there is a connection between these two actions: the removal of names from the scroll of life by Jesus Christ, and the sending of the little open scroll to St. John. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the Christian tradition which may help us to interpret this connection, and that may explain why the significance of the passage has never been clearly understood.

There is, however, an ancient Jewish tradition concerning the New Year which can help us to understand what is happening in this vision of St. John. According to this tradition every New Year's day is a time of judgement heralded by trumpets and scrolls are opened. On this day, everyone passes before the eyes of the Lord, and judgement for the majority of people is suspended for a period of 10 days, until the annual day of Atonement has ended. The judgement for the New Year - whether one will live or die - depends on one's conduct during this 10 day period of penitence. If we apply this tradition about judgement to the eschatological context of St. John's vision - the dawning of the New Age rather than the New Year - we find it helps us a great deal to understand this central part of the Apocalypse.

Christ the Lamb breaks the seventh and last seal of 'the scroll of life from the foundation of the world' and there follows a silence in heaven while the prayers of the saints are heard. The scroll of life contains the names of all those who have ever lived, 'from the foundation of the world'. After breaking the final seal, Christ is able to open this scroll and perform judgement by erasing names from it (3,5). Trumpets are sounded and it is a time of repentance (9,20-21), as in the New Year tradition. Every living creature passes before the eyes of the Lord and Judge, who examines the conduct of all the living with a view to reaching a final decision. It is a testing time (3,10), and "if anyone was not found written in the scroll of life, he will be thrown into the lake of fire" (20,15).

This is the precise context in which the little open scroll is eaten by St. John, who then writes the eschatological prophecy which will be publicly announced, in its time, by the two witnesses. The little scroll, then, concerns events in the period between the opening of the scroll of life in heaven (8,1) and the pronouncement of its contents at the final judgement (20,12), the time - analogous to the period of 10 days in the Jewish tradition - when Christ is able to remove names from the scroll (3,5).

With this in mind, it is possible to understand the connection between the two scrolls. The little scroll given to St. John describes, in the form of prophecy, the conditions under which the response of every living person will be judged, and the scroll of life will record the result of this judgement. The little scroll concerns the external form that the final judgement will take, whereas the scroll of life deals with its inner content. The complementarity of the two scrolls is therefore represented by the relationship of outside to inside, and for this reason I suggest that the little scroll represents the writing on the back of the Lamb's scroll in heaven (5,1), whilst on the inside of that same scroll are recorded the names of all who have lived since the foundation of the world.

In summary, the little scroll which is eaten by St. John represents the outer portion of Christ's scroll of life. The prophecy which issues from this experience concerns the final period of history, understood as a time when the decision will be taken as to who will live eternally, and who will die. As we have seen, this same prophecy not only defines who are the people of God but it also instructs and informs these people how to pass through the time of judgement. Since this prophecy forms the central part of the Apocalypse, we can consider the text of this book as the frame in which this precious portion of the scroll of life

is contained and transmitted down the ages. In fact, the Apocalypse is fundamentally the revelation of this mystery derived from the scroll of life.

Reflecting on this passage has brought us close to the author of the Apocalypse and to the spiritual significance of his writing. It has also made us aware of the importance of the text and, at the same time, the importance of our attitude towards it. By eating the little scroll, St. John not only gave us the prophecy which forms the central part of the text, but also the model for approaching and understanding it: through contemplation of the Apocalypse, we may arrive at a full understanding of this prophecy. *“And behold I am coming quickly. Blessed is he that takes to heart (contemplates) the words of the prophecy of this book”* (Rev 22,7).

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