

## Two Signs for the Church

Referring to the time of Christ's Second Coming, St. Matthew wrote "*But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father alone*" (Mt 24,36; cf. Mk 13,32). Similarly the Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 673) states "Since the Ascension Christ's coming in glory has been imminent, even though 'it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority'" (quoting Acts 1,7). But even though the Church does not know the 'times and seasons' of the final persecution and Second Coming of Christ, the synoptic gospels repeatedly warn the faithful to be ready, by watching out for the signs of the end-time (Mt 24,3 – 25,46; Mk 13,3-37; Lk 21,7-36).

However, most of the signs that are described in these gospels (i.e. false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famines, persecutions, apostasy, signs in the heavens) have occurred so often throughout history that they do not really distinguish one historical period from another. Because these signs are not specific for the end-time, skeptics rightly argue that their presence cannot persuade us that the end is any nearer now than it was a century or more ago. The only sign that is unique and specific for the end of history is the appearance of the "*desolating abomination spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place*" (Mt 24,15; cf. Mk 13,14), which St. Paul describes as the arrival of the lawless one, "*the one doomed to perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god and object of worship, so as to seat himself in the temple of God, claiming that he is a god*" (2Thess 2,3-4). However, this sign was so enigmatic that St. Luke interpreted it to refer to the profanation of Jerusalem by the pagan nations, following the siege in 66-70 AD (Lk 21,20-24).

The gospels, then, leave us so perplexed and uncertain about the signs that we should be vigilant for, that many of the faithful have come to believe that the Lord does not want his Church to recognize the approach of the end-time, or the time of the 'final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 677). Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, confusion over these eschatological signs could have been one of the reasons why the Lord sent his Revelation, "*which God gave to him, to show his servants what must happen quickly*" (Rev 1,1; cf. 22,6.16), for in the book of Revelation it is also written "*Be awake... For if you are not awake, I will come like a thief and you will never know at what hour I will come upon you*" (Rev 3,2-3; cf. 16,15). In this passage, it is clearly implied that the vigilant soul will indeed know the hour of the Lord's Coming. We would not be mistaken for believing that all the necessary information is given in the subsequent chapters – the last words of Holy Scripture.

Unfortunately confusion has also entered into the interpretation of the book of Revelation, to the extent that in some circles it is no longer regarded as an eschatological prophecy, but as a history of the Roman period or as a philosophy of history with no literal significance whatsoever. It is certain, however, that the author is

neither a historian nor a philosopher, but a prophet whose main concern is the judgment at the end of the age (Rev 22,6-20). Since this final event is still awaited, we would do well to take these words to heart (Rev 1,3; 22,7), and cease trying to bury them in the past or denying their relevance to the future.

The vision unifying the book of Revelation is that of a liturgy celebrated before the divine throne in the heavenly sanctuary. The liturgy follows the pattern for the daily service in the second temple (cf. *Mishnah* Tamid), and includes features recalling the rite of expiation on the Day of Atonement (cf. *Mishnah* Yoma). It is a synthesis of the liturgical activity on the Day of Atonement – the most important day of the ancient Hebrew calendar. The heavenly liturgy begins with the sacrifice of the Lamb (Jesus Christ) and ends with the opening of the scrolls at the final judgment, therefore spanning the entire history of salvation. However, the fact that the greater part of this liturgy corresponds to the final part of the daily temple service (the blowing of trumpets, pouring of libations and singing of psalms) confirms that the greater part of Revelation (chs. 8 – 22) refers to the final or eschatological period of history. We are therefore obliged to interpret this part of the book of Revelation as an eschatological prophecy.

As described in the book of Revelation, then, the sounding of the seven trumpets signals the final period of history (esp. Rev chs. 8 - 11)<sup>1</sup>. These trumpets announce the signs that Christ's faithful are advised to be vigilant for. However, in this part of the prophetic narrative we are confronted with a bewildering variety of unnatural, or rather anti-natural, phenomena, which cause extensive death and destruction in the ecosystem – a third of the earth, a third of the sea, a third of the fresh water, a third of the light sources, and a third of the human population (Rev 8:6-19). Although we can actually see environmental damage of the same kind as that which is described in this part of the book of Revelation,<sup>2</sup> we cannot yet see all the effects<sup>3</sup> or the full degree of damage that is described.

Despite their manifestly harmful environmental effects, the trumpet 'plagues' still fail to awaken the human conscience to repentance (Rev 9,20-21) – a fact that suggests they may also fail to alert the faithful to the nearness of the approaching judgment. It is in this context that the Lord provides the faithful with two simultaneous signs, or events, which cannot fail to be noticed by the Church and her leaders.

The first of these is the mission of two Christian witnesses, "*who will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days dressed in sackcloth*" (Rev 11,3). They not only announce the prophecy given to St. John so that he might 'prophesy again' (Rev 10,11),

---

<sup>1</sup> This is entirely consistent with the eschatological significance associated with trumpet blasts in other parts of Scripture (e.g. Jl 2,1; Zech 9,14; Mt 24,31; 1Cor 15,51-52).

<sup>2</sup> The damage to the earth and the vegetation caused by acid rain and erosion (1st trumpet), the damage to the sea and its creatures caused by pollution with spillage and waste (2nd trumpet), the damage to the rivers caused by industrial accidents and waste (3rd trumpet) and the damage to the atmosphere caused by gaseous emissions and atmospheric pollution (4th trumpet).

<sup>3</sup> E.g. the effects of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> trumpets.

but also fulfill the first part of this prophecy (Rev 11,3-13). It will be difficult to ignore these two witnesses of Christ, because in their appeal for repentance ‘they torment the inhabitants of the earth’ (Rev 11,10). Finally, they are killed in Jerusalem, at the start of the brief reign of ‘the beast’ (Rev 11,7-8) – the ultimate persecutor of the Church and antagonist of Jesus Christ (Rev 11,7; ch.13; 17,14). Incidentally, during this brief reign of the beast, we find the realization of Daniel’s prophecy for ‘the desolating abomination, standing in a holy place’ (Rev 13,13-15) as recalled by St. Paul (2Thess 2,3-4) and also in the gospels of Matthew and Mark (Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14).<sup>4</sup>

It is possible that the authenticity of the two Christian prophets may be doubted right up until the completion of their mission. Nevertheless, coincident with the start of their mission, the leaders of the Church will be presented with a second sign, which will be, in many ways, even more persuasive concerning the approach of the end-time.<sup>5</sup>

This second sign is the result of an extraordinary vision in heaven: “*And a great sign was seen in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun... and another sign was seen in heaven and behold, a great fiery-red dragon...the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth so that he might devour her child whenever she gives birth. And she gave birth to a son, a male, who is to shepherd the nations with a rod of iron. And her child was caught up to God and to his throne*” (Rev 12,1-5). The rest of the vision concerns the consequences of this ‘heavenly birth’: there is a war in heaven and the dragon and his angels are thrown down to the earth, whereupon the dragon pursues the woman who gave birth. The woman flees to a place that has been prepared for her in the desert, where she is nourished and protected for 1,260 days (Rev 12,6) and for a ‘time, two times and half a time’ (Rev 12,14). The dragon then goes off to attack the other children of the woman (Rev 12,17).<sup>6</sup>

In general terms, the heavenly vision seems to describe the history of the persecution of the early Church, following the Ascension and glorification of Jesus Christ. However, in St. John’s vision the birth of Jesus Christ is not presented as a historical event, but as a spiritual event that takes place in heaven immediately after the revelation of the two heavenly signs – the woman and the dragon. Furthermore, according to the context (cf. Rev 10,7), the revelation of these signs is an eschatological event.

The heavenly vision is referring to a mystical experience variously called the ‘heavenly’ or ‘eternal’ birth.<sup>7</sup> The one who is granted the vision of these signs in heaven

---

<sup>4</sup> This refers to the image of the beast, which the inhabitants of the world are coerced into worshipping (Rev 13,13-15). The same passage alludes to the rebuilding of the temple and the dedication of its altar in an impressive but unauthentic way (Rev 13,13).

<sup>5</sup> We know they are simultaneous because they both occur at the start of the period of 1260 days (cf. Rev. 11,3 and 12,6).

<sup>6</sup> The fact that the woman has other children, ‘those keeping the commandments of God and having the witness of Jesus’, confirms the collective interpretation of this sign: she primarily represents the community of faithful – the Church.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed exegesis of the mystical interpretation of this passage, see “Towards the Mystical Interpretation of Revelation 12” in *Revue Biblique*, 114-4 (2007) 594-614, which is also available online at <http://newtorah.org/The%20Mystical%20Interpretation%20of%20Rev%2012.html> .

immediately experiences a revelation of Jesus Christ from within his own soul, just as the woman gives birth to the male child. In this way, through the 'heavenly birth', the one who sees the signs comes to identify himself with the woman in the vision. So complete is the identification that, like the heavenly woman in St. John's vision, he flees to a place that has been prepared in the desert, where he is united with all those who have had a similar experience. They remain there for 1,260 days (Rev 12,6), followed by a 'time, two times and half a time' (Rev 12,14). We cannot avoid asking: "who are the people who see the signs in heaven, identify mystically with the woman, and then flee to the desert in a way that recalls the Israelites' exodus from Egypt?"

Firstly it is necessary to recognize the woman as the community of the faithful that is called 'Zion' by the prophets of the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> So those who come to be identified with Zion through the 'heavenly birth' can be recognized as the group of 144,000 chaste and immaculate followers of the Lamb, by the fact that, later in the vision, St. John sees them standing on the holy mountain of the same name, Mt. Zion (Rev 14,1-5). Furthermore, just as Zion is traditionally linked with the people of Israel, so also are the 144,000, since they are chosen from the 12 tribes of Israel (Rev 7,2-8) and therefore make up a 'remnant' of that people.<sup>9</sup>

Returning then to the nature of the second sign given to the leaders of the Church at this crucial moment at the end of history, we conclude that it involves the 'exodus' of a large number of the most dedicated followers of Christ to a mountain in the desert.<sup>10</sup> This is a specific vocation implanted in them by means of an extraordinary spiritual experience: the 'heavenly birth' or revelation of Jesus Christ. At the same time as the first of these followers are removing themselves to their place in the desert, the two prophets are empowered to begin their prophecy. These are two unambiguous signs that the faithful have been given in order to believe and understand that the great tribulation and final judgment are at hand. At this point it is worth recalling the passage in St. Luke's gospel that says "*But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand*" (Lk 21,28).

John Ben-Daniel  
P.O.Box 1106,  
Jerusalem 91010

---

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Is 4,13; 51,16; 52,1; Ps 147,12 .

<sup>9</sup> It should not be doubted that the 144,000 are men of flesh and blood, and not disembodied souls. As described in the text, they are the only ones on earth who are able to learn the song that is sung before the throne in heaven (Rev 14,3). Only souls that are united to their bodies have the faculty and the need to learn.

<sup>10</sup> Although the location of this holy mountain is not openly stated in the text, two points are clear: (a) it is not in the historical city of Jerusalem, since at this time the Holy City is given over to trampling by the nations (Rev 11,2) and instead of 'Zion' she is 'spiritually called Sodom and Egypt' (Rev 11,8). (b) It is a mountain in a desert corresponding to the one through which God led the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt. Only two mountains are held to be holy in the biblical tradition: Mt. Zion, which is the place of the dwelling or sanctuary of God, and Mt. Sinai, which is the place of the revelation of God. In the book of Revelation, Mt. Zion integrates both these locations since it is the site of the revelation of God in his sanctuary (Rev 11,19; 15,5).