# The Interpretation of the Apocalypse in the wake of the Synod on the Word of God

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## Introduction

I would like to begin with a quotation from the Catholic Catechism: "«*The Christian economy…will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ» (DV 4; cf. 1 Tim 6:14; Titus 2:13). Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries*."[1]

Perhaps there is no other book of the Bible to which this statement is more applicable than the final book, which some call 'The Apocalypse' and others 'The Book of Revelation'. Over the last 19 centuries, Christ's followers have had widely divergent views about its 'full significance'.

However, over the last century, something of a consensus has emerged in the academic study of the Apocalypse, in the form of the 'Contemporary Historical', or otherwise known as 'Preterist', interpretation. Today, this is the view held by most modern biblical scholars of all denominations. It is the interpretation taught in most Catholic theological faculties and seminaries, and it is the one that appears in most of the commentaries, including those of the Jerusalem Bible, the New American Bible and the Latin-American Bible. The Catholic Catechism also seems to favour this interpretation.[2] Since the rise of the historical-critical method at the beginning of the 20th century, this is the interpretation that has been leading the field.

Very briefly, this interpretation is the fruit of applying the historical-critical method to the entire text of the Apocalypse. As with that method, it starts from the restrictive assumption that the author is primarily addressing the church of his own times. Under this assumption, the main part of the text refers to the persecution of the early Church under the Roman Empire: the 'Beast from the Sea' (Rev 13,1) is said to represent a particular Roman Emperor, although there is no agreement about which one, and 'Babylon' (Rev 17-18) is supposed to be his ancient imperial capital at Rome. This interpretation buries the literal sense of the Apocalypse in the distant past, though there is still some debate about whether its prophetic visions have **all** been fulfilled (the extreme Preterist view), or whether one or two remain to be fulfilled in the future (the moderate Preterist view). At this point I would like to raise two general objections to all versions of the Preterist view.

The first objection arises from the history of interpretation and textual reception of the Apocalypse. If this book were so important for the early Church, it is curious that there is no mention of it in any surviving documents, until at least 60 years after it was written.[3] The Church Fathers who then referred to the Apocalypse in their writings (e.g.,

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[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*CCC*), London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, paragraph 66, p.22.

[2] In *CCC* 2642 and 2113 the 'great tribulation' is mentioned as a past event, in line with the Preterist interpretation, and in *CCC* 675, where the Catechism speaks of "the final trial that will shake the faith of many believers" the Apocalypse is not even given as a reference.

[3] R.H. Charles "Unhappily no work survives giving us the view of the earliest readers of the Apocalypse. Quite sixty years pass before we find any references to it, and over a hundred before any writer deals at length with its expectations." *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 2nd Edition, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark (1915) 7-8.

Justin Martyr, St. Irenæus, St. Hippolytus and Tertullian) saw it as a prophecy of the concluding period of history, and not as a book that was addressed primarily to the Church of their times.

However, from the writings of other Church Fathers, it is clear that the Apocalypse was received mainly with incredulity and incomprehension. For example, in the third century (c. 250 AD), St. Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria, wrote: "*Some before us have set aside and rejected the book altogether, criticizing it chapter by chapter, and pronouncing it without sense or argument, and maintaining that the title is fraudulent. For they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered thickly and densely by a veil of obscurity*".[4] Being careful not to reject the Apocalypse, Dionysius included himself among those who did not understand it. He wrote: "*And I do not reject what I cannot comprehend, but rather wonder because I do not understand it*".[5]

He was joined a century later by one of the greatest biblical scholars of the early Church, St. Jerome, who wrote: "*The apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words. In saying this I have said less than the book deserves. All praise of it is inadequate; manifold meanings lie hidden in its every word*".[6]

So the writings of the Fathers and scholars of the first few centuries certainly do not support the assumption that the message of the Apocalypse was primarily addressed to the early Church.

This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the Apocalypse was not as quickly or widely received as one would expect, if it had been understood to refer to the contemporary situation. In the early fourth century, Eusebius lists it as one of the texts whose inclusion into the New Testament canon was disputed and opposed, even by himself.[7] In fact, the text was not accepted into the canon of the Eastern Churches until at least the 7th century AD. Although it was accepted much earlier into the canon of the Western Church, its inclusion also met substantial opposition.[8] About a hundred years ago, a distinguished Cambridge scholar by the name of Henry Swete concluded that "*no book in the New Testament with so good a record was so long in gaining general acceptance*."[9]

Far from supporting the 'Preterist' view, the early history of interpretation and text reception shows us that, except for the few who saw it as a prophecy for the

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[4] As reported by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesaria, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 25.

[5] Eusebius quotes the following revealing admission from a lost work of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria: "But I could not venture to reject the book, as many brethren hold it in high esteem. But I suppose that it is beyond my comprehension, and that there is a certain concealed and more wonderful meaning in every part. For if I do not understand I suspect that a deeper sense lies beneath the words. I do not measure and judge them by my own reason, but leaving the more to faith I regard them as too high for me to grasp. And I do not reject what I cannot comprehend, but rather wonder because I do not understand it" *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 25.

[6] In his Letter to Paulinus, Bishop of Nola (*Ad Paulinum*, LIII, 8 dated to A.D. 394) Jerome wrote "Apocalypsis Joannis tot habet sacramenta, quot verba. Parum dixi pro merito voluminis. Laus omnis inferior est: in verbis singulis multiplices latent intelligentiae".

[7] *Historia Ecclesiastica* III,25, 3-5

[8] The main opponents were Marcion, the Alogoi, and Gaius of Rome, cf. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1906, cvi – cix.

[9] H.B. Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxiii. He goes on to add: "The key to the interpretation disappeared with the generation to which the book was addressed, perhaps even with the relief which the Asian Churches experienced upon the death of Domitian, and apart from any clue to its immediate reference, it was little else but a maze of inexplicable mysteries" (op. cit. cxiv). From the total lack of documentary evidence from the time, it is doubtful that even the generation to which the book was addressed possessed the key to its interpretation.

eschatological future, the Apocalypse was a profound enigma for the early Church. With the probable exception of the first three chapters and their messages for the seven local churches in Asia, the early Church certainly did not understand St. John's visions to refer to her contemporary situation.

Our second objection to the Preterist interpretation is related to the first: it simply does not match the text. If we compare the historical situation of the Christians, who were persecuted in the first few centuries, with the visions of the Apocalypse which are said to represent it, we do not find a convincing correspondence.

For example, a persecution as severe and widespread as the one described in the Apocalypse (Rev 7,9-17; 13,5-10) never took place in the history of the early 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' (17,15 – 18.24), which most scholars identify with imperial Rome. There has never been environmental damage on the scale described after the blowing of the first four trumpets (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).

Furthermore, the final judgment has evidently not yet occurred, since its main result is the removal of all evil, sin and suffering, in order to make way for the fulfilment of eternal salvation (Rev 21-22). No one can seriously argue that evil and suffering have been eradicated from the world or that creation has yet reached this state of eternal perfection.[10]

It should also be noticed that the only part of the Apocalypse that is explicitly concerned with the situation at the time it was written (i.e. Rev 2-3) hardly mentions the problem of persecution: in the messages 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). Only a small part of these messages is found to be encouragement for those already being persecuted; the greater part is preoccupied with the very opposite: a prevailing tendency to avoid persecution through compromise with pagan society.

In summary, the 'Preterist' interpretation attributes to the text a meaning which it did not have at the time of its composition, but was the product of a later method of interpretation. This is what is called *eisegesis*, or accommodation. It is the result of projecting on to the main part of the text a meaning that is foreign to it, in this case the history of the early Church in the Roman Period.

**Theological interpretation**

We should therefore regard it as a blessing that the recent Synod on the Word of God (Rome, October 2008) has reminded us of the limitations of the historical-critical method, on which the Preterist interpretation is based. These limitations were already

[10] Perhaps the most compelling indication that we have not yet reached this state of perfection is the presence of suffering, mourning and pain in the world, for all these will be absent in the Holy City after the consummation and renewal of Creation (cf. Rev 21,3-4). It is interesting, in this light, to examine the self-description of the city called Babylon as a woman who claims royalty and denies suffering (18,7). She appears to think that she is the Holy City, in which there will be no more suffering. This gives rise to the term "Babylonian Theology" for those habits of thought that deny the reality of a future, final Judgment by claiming that the consummation has already arrived.

clearly stated in 1993, when the Pontifical Biblical Commission affirmed that the historical-critical method: "*restricts itself to a search for the meaning of a biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the Church*".[11] Since the Apocalypse embraces such a vast horizon—nothing less than the complete fulfilment of the entire plan of God at the end of history (cf. Rev 10,7)—it is not surprising that the historical-critical method is too limited to be used in the interpretation of this book. Because of these limits, we cannot, and should not, expect the 'Preterist' interpretation to give us full significance of the Apocalypse.

So where do we go from here? The Synod invites us to take the 'positive fruit' of the historical-critical method and then move on to study the 'theological' dimension of the text 'in an adequate manner'.[12] For what constitutes 'an adequate manner', the Synod invokes paragraph 12 of the conciliar document 'Dei Verbum': "'*Dei Verbum' identifies and presents the three decisive references to arrive at the divine dimension and therefore, to the theological meaning of the Sacred Scriptures. It is a question of the content and the unity of the whole of Scripture, of the living tradition of the whole Church and, finally, of attention to the analogy of faith*".[13]

You may agree that Church documents are often more difficult to interpret Holy Scripture. Help with understanding 'the three decisive references' comes from the Catholic Catechism: here they are called the 'three criteria for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Spirit who inspired it', and together they form the main principle for the correct interpretation of Scripture:[14] The first of the three criteria is particularly important—"*Be especially attentive 'to the content and unity of the whole Scripture'. Different as the books which compose it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ is the center and heart, open since his Passover*".[15]

Further explanation can be found in the section of the Catechism dealing with 'the unity of the Old and New Testaments'.[16] Here we learn that the traditional, apostolic way of demonstrating the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments is through typology, which starts from the premise that Christ, through his New Covenant, brings about the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation under the Old Covenant. The fundamental relationship between the two Testaments is therefore one of fulfillment, and their unity is best demonstrated by showing how OT 'types' and promises are fulfilled in the NT.[17]

We can therefore be guided by 'typology' when interpreting the Apocalypse 'theologically', in accordance with the Spirit who inspired it. What we understand by this is that if our interpretation of this NT text shows the fulfillment of an OT 'type' or promise, then we can be reasonably sure that we have a correct 'theological' interpretation. Taking this argument one step further: if our interpretation of the whole text shows Christ fulfilling God's entire plan of salvation, as in fact it does, then we can

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[11] *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, I,A,4, 40. And again: "*Historical-critical exegesis has too often tended to limit the meaning of text by tying it too rigidly to precise historical circumstances*" op. cit. II,B,1, 80.
[12] The Conclusions of the Episcopal Synod on the Word of God, proposition 25 (Rome, October 2008).
[13] Idem. proposition 25.
[14] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*CCC*), London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, paragraph 111.
[15] *CCC* 112.
[16] *CCC* 128-130.
[17] The 'New testament has to be read in the light of the Old' because, as St Augustine put it: 'the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New' (*Quaest. In Hep.*, 2,73; quoted in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Vatican Press, 1993, 103; and in *CCC* 129).

be even more sure that we have arrived at the divine significance of the text. We will return to this point after proposing our new approach.

**Temple-liturgical imagery**

The most striking aspect of the Apocalypse is its imagery. This is because the book is largely composed of visions granted to the author, whose main task was to put them into words. So the images are not a secondary feature of the text, but are its core material. Furthermore, almost all the images of the Apocalypse evoke corresponding images in the Old Testament. It is in the images of the Apocalypse that we perceive its profound relationship with the OT—a relationship that is based not so much on quotations or verbal references, as in other parts of the NT, but on this common stock of imagery. Rather than a 're-reading' of the OT, the Apocalypse is a "re-visioning".

At this point, I would like to focus your attention on a very prominent aspect of this imagery: the temple and liturgical aspect. A quick glance at the text will convince you that its temple and liturgical imagery is very highly developed. [18] Hebrew cultic practice is reflected not only by the figure of the slain Lamb (Rev 5,6), but also by many features of its heavenly surroundings. In many passages of the Apocalypse, this heavenly setting is explicitly called God's sanctuary (ναός: 3,12; 7,15; 11,1.2.19; 14,15.17; 15,5.6.8; 16,1.17) or dwelling (σκηνή: 13,6). It contains many of the liturgical objects and furnishings that characterized the ancient temple cult: for example, the lampstands (1,12.13.20; 2,1.5; 11,4), the altar of incense (6,9; 8,3.5; 9,13; 14,18; 16,7), the altar (11,1), the Ark of the Covenant (11,19), as well as harps (5,8; 14,2; 15,2), trumpets (8,2) and libation bowls (15,7; 16,1).

At the same time, words and actions described in these passages clearly represent liturgical activities resembling those performed in the former temple at Jerusalem: the offering of incense (8,3-4), blowing of trumpets (chaps. 8-11), pouring of libations (chaps. 15-16), divine worship (4,8-11; 5,12-14; 7,10-12; 12,10-12; 16,5-7), thanksgiving (11,15-18; 19,1-8) and singing of hymns of praise (5,9-10; 15,3-4).

It has long been recognized that parts of the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10,19-20; 12,22-23) and the Apocalypse (especially chaps. 4-5; 7; 14-15; 19) describe a heavenly liturgy, in which the faithful on earth participate along with the heavenly assemblies.[19] This liturgical dimension of the Apocalypse has also been acknowledged and studied by modern scholarship.[20] What, perhaps, has not been grasped sufficiently

[18] The subject of the heavenly Temple was also became a prominant feature in the apocalyptic tradition. In all of the following non-canonical writings the author ascends to heaven and proceeds to give a description of the Temple there: the book of Watchers (1Enoch chs. 1–36), the Testament of Levi, 2Enoch, the Similitudes of Enoch (1Enoch chs. 37–71), the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Ascension of Isaiah and 3Baruch (see Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, and Bissoli, *Il Tempio*). On this subject, however, the conclusions of the recent study by Briggs should be mentioned: "In short, the belief that John was appreciably influenced by non-scriptural Jewish literature, however true or untrue it may be regarding other themes in Revelation, is to be rejected regarding the temple. The sanctuary strains of the OT testimony alone were apparently more than adequate for John to have built his temple scenes and symbolisms upon" (Robert A. Briggs, *Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, New York: Peter Lang, 1999, 217–18).

[19] This tradition is reflected, for example, in *CCC* 1137-39.

[20] Vanni, *L'Apocalisse*, 101: "L'Apocalisse ha una sua dimensione liturgica. È questo, un fatto che l'esegesi e la teologia biblica dell'Apocalisse possono considerare acquisito, specialmente dopo gli studi che si sono susseguiti sull'argumento in questi ultimi anni." (The relevant bibliography is given in the footnote to this passage). Useful summaries of this reasearch are to be found in Ulfgard, *Feast and Future*, 21-27, and R. Nusca, "Liturgia e Apocalisse" in *Apokalypsis* (in onore di Ugo Vanni, eds. E. Bosetti and A. Colacrai, Assisi: Citadella Editrice, 2005) 459-472.

is the degree to which it is combined with temple imagery and corresponds to specific liturgical activities in the former temple at Jerusalem.

This should not surprise us at all, since the heavenly sanctuary that was revealed to the author of the Apocalypse is the same as the one that was revealed to Moses, as a plan for the tabernacle that he was asked to construct (Exod 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8). There is, therefore, a true typological correspondence between the heavenly sanctuary described in the Apocalypse, the tabernacle built by Moses, and the former temple in Jerusalem that was modeled on this.[21] Owing to this correspondence, the temple-liturgical imagery in the Apocalypse can be compared with descriptions of the divine cult in the OT, and in the Jewish oral tradition recorded in the *Mishnah*, and in this way its precise significance can be ascertained.

**The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple**

As we do not have time to consider this comparison in detail (those who are interested may wish to refer to our book), I would like just to present a brief sketch of our findings:[22]

1. The opening vision of the seven golden lampstands and the subsequent messages to the churches (**Rev 1,10-20; chaps. 2-3**) represent the trimming and refueling of the seven-branched lampstand at the start of the morning service in the ancient temple. On the annual Day of Atonement, this action was performed by the high priest.
2. The appearance of the Lamb before the throne of God in heaven (**chs. 4-5**) corresponds to the entrance of the high priest into the most sacred part of the temple on the Day of Atonement, in order to make expiation for the sanctuary with the blood of the victims. In the Apocalypse, the expiation of the heavenly sanctuary appears to be represented by the defeat of Satan and his angels, and by their expulsion from heaven, in such a way that "*there was no longer a place for them in heaven*" (12,7-12).
3. The missions of the first four horsemen (**6,1-8**) represent the part of the morning service reserved for the reading of the Ten Commandments and other parts of the Law.[23]

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[21] Yves Congar (*The Mystery of the Temple,* 209) expresses it thus: "If John thus sees the heavenly temple in the shape of the Temple of Jerusalem, it is not so much because he imagines the sanctuary on the model of the sanctuary he had seen on earth at Jerusalem, it is principally because the latter, as the successor of the Mosaic tabernacle, had been constructed according to the heavenly prototype shown to Moses on the mountain". Although it is unlikely that the Exodus passages (Exod 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8) originally meant that the plan shown to Moses involved a vision of the heavenly sanctuary, this is certainly how they were re-interpreted later in the post-exilic period. Through this process of re-interpretation, these and certain other passages (Ezek 43,10-11; 1Chron 28,11-20) lie at the origin of the numerous apocalyptic temple visions (R.H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*,166-67; Gray, *Sacrifice in the OT*, 154-57).

[22] John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003. For a shorter presentation, see their article "Sacrificial Symbolism of the Lamb" online at:
http://www.newtorah.org/The%20Symbolism%20of%20the%20Lamb.html

[23] Just as the theme of the readings in the daily morning service was the affirmation of God's sovereignty and the importance of observing his commandments, so the mission of the white horse (Rev 6,1-2) represents the victorious force of the God's kingdom and sovereignty, communicated to mankind by means of the preaching of Christ's gospel. The missions of the remaining three horses (Rev 6,3-8) represent, in a complementary way, the negative effects of rebelling against God and disobeying his commandments (cf. Lev 26,14-46; Deut 28,15-69; Jer,17-19; Ezek 5,1-17), already touched upon in one of the readings at the corresponding part of the morning service (Deut 11,16-17). Of relevance here is the midrashic amplification of the Ten Commandments in the Targums of Exodus, written around the first century BC and expounded by Jean Potin, in *La fête juive de la Pentecôte* (Etude des textes liturgiques,

4. The souls of the martyrs who appear under the altar in heaven (**6,9**) correspond to the parts of the sacrifice, after being transferred to the base of the outer altar in the former temple.
5. The sealing of the 144,000 men that is described in the Apocalypse (**7,1-8**) corresponds to the pronouncement of the priestly blessing.[24]
6. The offering of **much** incense with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar in heaven (**8,3-4**) corresponds to the same action in the morning service of the former temple, which was also considered as a time of prayer for all the community. Incidentally, the little detail concerning the large quantity of incense that is offered recalls the great quantity of incense that was offered in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.
7. The angel who throws fire on to the earth from the altar in heaven (8,5) evokes the act of throwing the offerings on to the fire that was always kept alight on the outer altar.
8. The sounding of the seven trumpets (**chaps. 8-11**) and the outpouring of the bowls (**chaps. 15-16**) together with the singing of the celestial choirs described in the Apocalypse (**7,9-17; 14,2-3; 15,3-4; 19,1-8**) are analogous to the use of the trumpets and bowls at the culmination of the morning service, the time when the Levitical musicians used to sing psalms and praise to God.
9. At the conclusion of the heavenly liturgy, the scroll of Life, which had been given to the Lamb a long time previously (5,7-14), is opened and read out at the final Judgment (**20,11-12**), just as the high priest used to read from the scroll of the Law at the end of the special rite of expiation on the Day of Atonement.
10. In the Apocalypse all the agents of iniquity, including Satan himself, are thrown alive into the lake of fire (**Rev 19,20; 20,10**), to bring an end to sin forever, whilst in the annual rite of expiation the scapegoat was thrown alive from a cliff, only temporarily removing sins from the community.[25]

In this comparison, we find that the main features of the heavenly liturgy in the Apocalypse resemble the content and sequence of the daily morning service in the former temple, but also include actions analogous to specific rites that were performed on the annual Day of Atonement. This combination can be seen as a simplification of the liturgy that used to take place annually, on the Day of Atonement, in the ancient

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Paris: Cerf, 1971): appended to each of the last five commandments is the mention of an affliction that has entered the world to punish the breaking of that commandment (in order: sword, plague, famine, drought and famine, war and exile). The author is impressed by the evident connection with the missions of the 4 horsemen in Revelation: "Les rapprochements avec l'Apocalypse de Jean sont frappants. En Ap 6,1-7 nous trouvons les mêmes fléaux…Manifestement l'Apocalypse et le Targum sont très proches l'un de l'autre et utilisent les mêmes sources, à moins que Jean n'utilise le Targum lui-même"(ibid., 100). "En reprenant les mêmes fléaux que le Targum, l'Apocalypse rappelle aussi aux hommes la menace qui pèse sur eux…" (ibid., 297). This provides further support for the correspondence between the reading of the Ten Commandments in the daily service and the missions of the 4 horsemen in Revelation.

[24] Whilst the smoke of the incense was rising from the altar, the priests gathered on the steps in front of the sanctuary in order to recite the priestly blessing (Num 6,24-26). During the recital, the Name of the Lord was pronounced as it is written (*m.Tamid* 7:2), thus fulfilling the divine purpose of the blessing: "...in this way they will place my Name on the Israelites and I will bless them" (Num 6,27). In Revelation the act of placing the Name of God on the Israelites is represented, in a particular way, by the impression of the seal of the Living God upon the 144,000 men chosen from the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7,1-8), leaving the Name of God and of the Lamb imprinted on their foreheads (Rev 14,1).

[25] The heavenly liturgy thus defined includes the majority of the liturgical elements mentioned in the text of the Apocalypse, but not all. For example, the filling of the heavenly sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God (Rev 15,8) is not included, and neither are the allusions in the text to the Jewish Feasts of Tabernacles (Rev 7,9-17) and Weeks (Rev 14,1-5). These and other liturgical themes are identified in Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple,* 127-211.

temple.[26] As the fulfillment of every kind of sacrifice, the slain Lamb substitutes all the sacrifices that used to be offered on the Day of Atonement, except for the live sin-offering to Azazel whose role is fulfilled, in a modified way, by the false prophet.[27] The Lamb therefore corresponds to the first sacrifice on that day: the lamb chosen to be the 'continual holocaust' for the morning service—in Hebrew it was called the *Tamid*. As a result, the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse closely corresponds to the daily morning service on the Day of Atonement and includes liturgical elements that recall the specific rite of expiation that was performed on that day.

More than any other type of sacrifice, the 'continual holocaust' formed the basis of the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews. A biblical scholar has described it like this: "*It was the true heart and centre of the entire sacrificial worship. In no circumstances could it be dispensed with. In AD 70, when Jerusalem had for long been besieged by the Romans and famine was at its peak, the daily sacrifice was nevertheless regularly offered, and it counted as one of the heaviest of blows when, on the 17th of Tammuz, it had at last to be discontinued*".[28] Under the form of the 'continual holocaust' at the center of a liturgy that corresponds to that of the Day of Atonement—the most important day of the Hebrew calendar—Jesus Christ reveals himself in the most emphatic way as the fulfillment of the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews (cf. Matt 5,17-19).[29]

To sum up, then, the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute the starting point of a liturgy that is currently being celebrated in heaven; this liturgy continues up until the end of history and represents a synthesis of the liturgy that was performed on the Day of Atonement at the ancient temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. Being the main activity in the heavenly sanctuary, the liturgy provides a framework that not only embraces the entire sequence of visions in the Apocalypse, but also determines the course of events on earth—mostly of a judgmental nature. The Apocalypse, therefore, can be understood primarily as the revelation of the course of this liturgy for reconciliation taking place in heaven, and of its consequences for the lives of the peoples, believers and non-believers, on earth.[30]

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[26] This finding underlies the striking doctrinal agreement between the Apocalypse and the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. Albert Vanhoye, "L'Apocalisse e la Lettera agli Ebrei", in *Apokalypsis* 275). In the absence of any literary dependence, both works present Christ as the high-priestly redeemer and sacrificial victim in a Day of Atonement liturgy "that sees the current period of afflictions as a *Mo'ed Kippur*, a period of atonement, which began with Jesus' death and will end with his Parousia" (Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity*, 193).

[27] The false prophet is described as a beast "having two horns like a lamb and speaking like a dragon" (Rev 13,11)—a description that indicates the false prophet performs a diabolical counterpart to the expiatory role of Christ the seven-horned Lamb. Compelling people to worship the beast (Rev 13,12-17) to whom Satan had given his power, throne and great authority (Rev 13,1-2), the false prophet does indeed cause the removal of sin, not in the way brought about by Christ the Lamb—through the sinner's repentance and reconciliation with God—but by means of the tragic and eternal condemnation of the unrepentant sinner (Rev 14,9-11; cf. 2 Thess 2,11-12).

[28] Schürer, *History of the Jewish People*, vol II, 300.

[29] As one of the basic messages of the Apocalypse, Christ's fulfilment of the ancient sacrificial cult should make us consider whether the real background to the book is not the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. and the subsequent reformation of Judaism at Jamnia, rather than the Roman persecution of the Early Christian Church, as assumed in the Preterist interpretation. The Apocalypse should then be understood as the divine response to the loss of the temple. In this preoccupation with the temple, Revelation is indeed representative of the entire apocalyptic tradition (see John J.Collins, "Jerusalem and the Temple in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature of the Second Temple Period", *International Rennert Guest Lecture Series:1* [Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University, 1998] 4).

[30] The dominant theme of atonement in the Apocalypse, expressed through its liturgical symbolism, merely subordinates, but does not invalidate, the exodus imagery in the text. In this way the full

Let us return for a moment to the Church's rules for correct interpretation. Here, in this liturgy for reconciliation taking place at the heart of the Apocalypse, we have a framework for interpreting the entire text as the fulfillment of the OT temple and liturgical tradition, which in turn represents the course of God's plan of salvation through Christ, the slain Lamb. I believe that we should not hope for a more reliable and secure confirmation for our 'theological' interpretation.

Having said this, I would like to mention three significant implications arising from this way of reading the Apocalypse. The first concerns the problematic millennium of **Rev 20,4-6**, which many believers are expecting in the future. In addition to the arguments that have already been proposed against this futuristic position, we can add the finding that the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse, starting with the Ascension of Christ and continuing up to the final Judgment, represents a synthesis of the liturgy that was performed in the ancient temple on the Day of Atonement. It therefore represents a day in heaven, and according to Psalm 90,4, a day in heaven corresponds to a thousand years on earth. Using this passage as a hermeneutical key, the thousand-year period in ch. 20 is the period of time 'on earth' that corresponds to the duration of the liturgy 'in heaven', which is precisely the era in which we find ourselves now.

The second implication arises from the fact that the culmination and conclusion of the liturgy in the former Temple was represented by the blowing of trumpets and the outpouring of the libation. In an analogous way, the sounding of trumpets and the outpouring of libation bowls represents the conclusion of the heavenly liturgy, which, as we have said, coincides with the end of history. Since the greater part of the text of Apocalypse, from chapter 8 onwards, is concerned with this conclusive part of the heavenly liturgy, we can infer that the greater part of the text concerns the end of history—it is an eschatological prophecy and ought to be interpreted as such.

The third implication is that, on the analogy of the liturgy of the former Temple, the liturgy revealed in the Apocalypse follows a very precise chronological order. Since this order determines the events described in the visions of the Apocalypse, it follows that these events also conform to a definite temporal order or sequence.

**The Baseline Prophetic Narrative**

This last implication transports us from the image to the word, which is to say from temple-liturgical imagery to the literary structure of the text itself, in order to discern this orderly sequence of events. The first thing to note is that the visions of the main part of the text (**Rev 4 – 22,5**) are structured in three successive series of judgments with a short preparatory scene before each series.

Reflecting the progress of the liturgy in heaven, the breaking of the 7 seals leads to the blowing of the 7 trumpets which ends in the outpouring of the 7 bowls of libation. The text does indeed narrate a succession of liturgical events, starting with the Ascension of Christ (**chapter 5**) and ending with the final Judgment at the end of history (**chapter 20**). Although there are four large interruptions, which we will deal with in a moment, I hope you agree that this 'baseline prophetic narrative', as I would like to call it, gives the text a very clear and orderly structure:

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|---|---|
| 4,1-11 | Initial vision of the Throne of God in heaven |
| 5,1-14 | Preparations for the breaking of the 7 Seals of the scroll |

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significance of the final messianic redemption is conveyed—a redemption (exodus typology) from sin through divine reconciliation (atonement).

| | |
|---|---|
| 6,1-2 | Breaking of the 1st Seal |
| 6,3-4 | Breaking of the 2nd Seal |
| 6,5-6 | Breaking of the 3rd Seal |
| 6,7-8 | Breaking of the 4th Seal |
| 6,9-11 | Breaking of the 5th Seal |
| 6,12 – 7,1 | Breaking of the 6th Seal |
| 7,2-17 | INTERRUPTION |
| 8,1 | Breaking of the 7th Seal |
| 8,2-6 | Preparations for the Blowing of the 7 Trumpets |
| 8,7 | Blowing of the 1st Trumpet |
| 8,8-9 | Blowing of the 2nd Trumpet |
| 8,10-11 | Blowing of the 3rd Trumpet |
| 8,12-13 | Blowing of the 4th Trumpet |
| 9,1-12 | Blowing of the 5th Trumpet |
| 9,13-21 | Blowing of the 6th Trumpet |
| 10,1 – 11,14 | INTERRUPTION |
| 11,15-19 | Blowing of the 7th Trumpet |
| 12,1 – 15,5 | INTERRUPTION |
| 15,6-8 | Preparations for the Outpouring of the 7th Bowl |
| 16,1-2 | Outpouring of the 1st Bowl |
| 16,3 | Outpouring of the 2nd Bowl |
| 16,4-7 | Outpouring of the 3rd Bowl |
| 16,8-9 | Outpouring of the 4th Bowl |
| 16,10-11 | Outpouring of the 5th Bowl |
| 16,12-16 | Outpouring of the 6th Bowl |
| 16,17-21 | Outpouring of the 7th Bowl |
| 17,1 – 19,5 | INTERRUPTION |
| 19,6 – 22,5 | The fulfilment of the Plan of God: |

| | |
|---|---|
| 19,6-10 | The announcement of the wedding of the Lamb |
| 19,11-16 | The manifestation of the ‘Lord of lords and King of kings’ |
| 19,17-21 | The Battle of the Great Day (at Armageddon, cf. 16,16) |
| 20,1 –10 | The history and condemnation of Satan (the Millennium) |
| 20,11-15 | The final Judgment |
| 21,1 –8 | The new Creation |
| 21,9-22,5 | The new Jerusalem - the Wife of the Lamb. |

In this ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, there is no question of cyclical repetition. We see a linear progression, like a telescope being extended: the seventh and last member of each series contains within itself the next series: the 7th Seal generates the entire Trumpet series and the 7th Trumpet generates the entire Bowl series. The progression from one series to the next gives the impression of greater and greater attention to detail as we approach the final Judgment and consummation.

Before going on to examine the interruptions, I would like to focus a moment on this end-point of the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, which we have called ‘the Fulfillment of the Plan of God’. This final section describes traditional eschatological events such as the second Coming of Christ, the defeat of the devil and his agents, the final Judgment and the New Creation. It is straightforward in

all respects except for one: after the Lord's second Coming and the final battle at Armageddon (**end of chapter 19**), but before the final Judgment (**end of chapter 20**), a thousand year interval is described, in which the devil is said to be chained and the saints and martyrs rule with Christ in the 'first resurrection' (20,4-6). This is the problematic 'millennium', which we have already briefly identified as the period of time on earth corresponding to the duration of the liturgy in heaven, and which is analogous to a day—the Day of Atonement. It is the period of salvation in which we find ourselves now. We proposed that the key to understand this 'thousand year' period is to be found in **Psalm 90,4**, where it is written: "*In your sight (Lord), a thousand years are like a day, a yesterday that is passing*". The wording in this verse does actually support the conclusion that this period has already begun, but is hidden to most people until the second Coming, when it will be revealed retrospectively 'as a yesterday that is passing' to those who have not already accepted it.

**The interruptions in the baseline prophetic narrative**

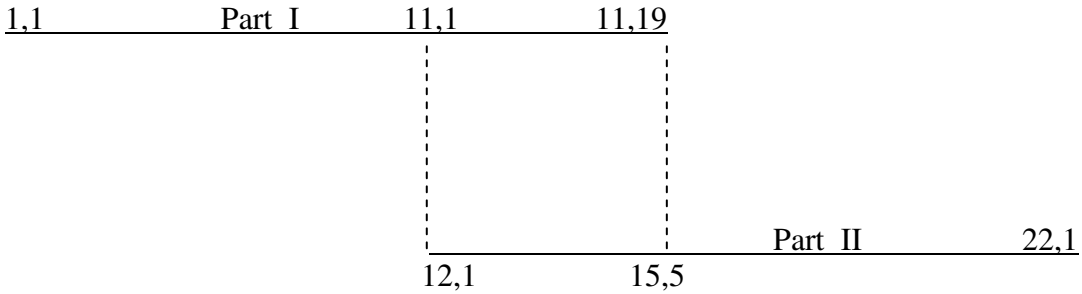
We come now to the four substantial interruptions that disturb the orderly sequence of judgments described in the 'baseline prophetic narrative'. By disrupting the continuity of the visions, these interruptions have caused a lot of confusion among interpreters. We propose the following solution.

The largest of these interruptions (**Rev 12,1–15,4**) breaks the continuity of the 'baseline prophetic narrative' at the mid-point of the Apocalypse, and divides it into two equal parts of 11 chapters each. The first part comprises chapters 1 – 11 and the second part chapters 12 – 22:

1,1 Part I 11,19

12,1 Part II 22,1

Because of some verbal repetitions concerning the 'opening of the heavenly sanctuary' and the two temporal periods of 1260 days and 42 months, we discover that there is a section of overlap between chapter 11, at the end of the first part, and chapters 12–15, at the beginning of the second part. We will call this the 'overlapping section':




Verbal repetitions: 1,260 days "And the Sanctuary
42 months in heaven was opened….."

This overlapping section occupies the very centre of the text (11,1–15,5) and fits into the 'baseline prophetic narrative' in the interval between the sixth and seventh trumpet blasts. It consists primarily of chapters 11-15. However, by means of other verbal-thematic links, we can confirm that all the other interruptions in the 'baseline prophetic narrative' (**i.e. chapters 7, 10, and 17-18**) are indeed related to this centrally-placed overlapping section:

a) In chapter 7, the numbered group of 144,000 men (7,2-8) and the innumerable crowd of martyrs who pass through the great tribulation (7,9-17) are identical, respectively, to the assembly of 144,000 men seen on Mt. Zion (14,1-5) and to the conquerors of the beast (14,2-3; 15,2-4) described in the overlapping section.
b) In chapter 10, the encounter between the author and the mighty angel introduces the overlapping section and explains its divine origin (11,1–15,5).
c) In chapters 17 and 18, the detailed description of the condemnation and destruction of Babylon refers back to the announcement of the same event in the overlapping section (14,8; cf.18,2).

It appears, then, that all four interruptions in the 'baseline prophetic narrative' are either identified with, or directly related to, the central overlapping section (11,1–15,4). Together they form a prophecy that stands on its own within this narrative as a 'prophecy within the prophecy'. This surprising conclusion brings us to our final task, which is to identify the main purpose and content of this self-contained, centrally-placed prophecy.

**The prophecy of the overlapping section (11,1–15,5)**

Let us start with the main characteristics of this part of the text:

a) The first point to make is that the overlapping section clearly refers to events that immediately precede the sound of the 7th trumpet, at the end of history (11,15-19).
b) Secondly, it occupies the central part of the text (11,1–15,5) and in other biblical documents a central location denotes prime importance. For example the central part of the Pentateuch, Lev ch.16, contains the description of the most important event in the ancient Hebrew calendar—the Day of Atonement.
c) Thirdly, the overlapping of the two parts of this section allows the transmission of a greater amount of information than in one part alone, although in a less obvious way. Incidentally, one is reminded here of a feature that is typical of apocalypses, and which David Aune has summarized as follows: "*the peculiar idiom of apocalypses…is to thinly conceal what it purports to reveal so that the audience may themselves have the experience of decoding or deciphering the message*".[31]

We can summarize these three points by saying that the overlapping section contains an eschatological prophecy that is presented as the central message of the whole book. To discern the significance of this prophecy, we must examine its opening verses, which scholars consider to be one of the most puzzling parts of the text. After the author's rapture into the heavenly sanctuary in Rev 4, he finds himself on earth again in front of a mighty angel telling him to take a little scroll and eat it:

[31] David E. Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre" *Semeia* 36 (1986) 89, quoted by Christopher R. Smith in his "The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions" *Novum Testamentum*, XXXVI, 4(1994) 382.

"*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. And a cane similar to a rod was given to me while saying: Get up and measure the Sanctuary of God and the altar and those who are 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 forty-two months. And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days dressed in sackcloth*." (**Rev 10,10–11,3**).

Here John describes a renewal of his prophetic calling in terms reminiscent of the vocation of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 2,8–3,3): he is asked to swallow a scroll and is then told he must 'prophecy again'. Curiously, though, instead of being commanded to write or announce the prophecy, like Ezekiel, the theme suddenly changes and John was commanded to measure the inner part of the temple,[32] and reject the outer part. Immediately after this curious command, the theme of prophecy returns with the prophetic mission of the two witnesses.

To remain coherent with its prophetic context, there is only one way to interpret the divine command to measure the temple: we should understand this as the command to 'prophesy again' expressed in a metaphorical way. This is certainly not the only instance of a metaphorical command in the NT: another example is when Jesus commanded Peter to "*Feed my sheep*" (**Jn 21,17**). Just as neither Jesus nor Peter was a sheep farmer, we must not assume that John is here being told to go and work on a building site. We can only start to make sense of these commands when we realize they are metaphorical expressions, and as such they convey a deeper, more spiritual meaning than would be possible with ordinary speech. As St. Peter received his pastoral role in a metaphorical way, so here St. John is being given a prophetic role in metaphorical terms that convey its spiritual purpose and significance.

As an aside, please note that immediately following the above passage in John's Gospel, where Peter receives his pastoral commission from the risen Lord, he turns to the beloved disciple and asks "*what about him*?" The Lord's answer has puzzled generations of Christians: "*If I want him to remain until I come, what is it to do with you?*" (Jn 21,22). It is of great significance that the metaphorical command given to John in this part of the Apocalypse explains exactly how and, in what sense, 'he remains until Jesus comes'. John will be engaged in the task of metaphorically 'measuring the new temple' until Christ comes at the end of history. Please note: this link also identifies, once and for all, the beloved disciple with John, the author of the Apocalypse.

In a general sense, the metaphorical command speaks about the author's participation in the construction of the new temple. Its precise meaning becomes apparent when we break down its various elements: the measuring rod that John was given is a metaphor for the prophecy that follows in the text; the act of measuring denotes the act of witnessing this prophecy and, as in other parts of the NT (cf. Eph 2,19-22; 1 Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12), the new temple is a metaphor for the People of God, the Church. By witnessing the prophecy given to him, St John is helping to 'build up' – to edify – the more holy, inner part of the Church. The secularized 'outer part' of the Church, by rejecting this prophecy, will end up being rejected from the

[32] The Sanctuary God, the altar and those worshipping there correspond to the three main elements of the inner court of the ancient temple at Jerusalem.

Church altogether.[33]

There is more to follow: clearly St. John witnessed this prophecy by writing it in a book, but the first event he recorded describes how it will be publicly announced by two witnesses, or prophets. As the first event recorded in St. John's prophecy, the mission of these two prophets will therefore have the effect of 'realizing' the prophecy. Furthermore, with the 'realization' of the prophecy, there will be no further need to witness it. So the mission of the two witnesses, and their public announcement of the prophecy, will bring to completion exactly what St. John was commanded to do: to measure the inner part of the temple, and to reject the outer part. In other words, this mission helps to complete the edification and purification of the Church, prior to the events of the last days.

The part of the prophecy with this particular function terminates with the completion of the new temple, which indicated in the text, as in the Old Testament (Ex 40,34-35; 1 Kgs 8,10-13), by the filling of the Sanctuary with the smoke of the Power and Glory of God (**Rev 15,8**). This event coincides with the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary, which is described at the conclusion of the overlapping section.

So without going into the more complex issues of exegesis at this stage, let us sum up by saying that this central section of text brings together all the various interruptions in the 'baseline prophetic narrative' and defines them as a self-contained '**prophecy within a prophecy**'. The prophecy relates to events in a final but brief period of history, immediately preceding the seventh and last trumpet. It has a specific role in the edification and perfectioning of the Church, and will be publicly announced at a certain time by two witnesses of our Lord. The content of the prophecy is given in the part we have called the overlapping section (**11,1–15,4**) and in the three other interruptions linked to this (**Rev 7, Rev 10 and Rev 17-18**). If you study all these passages, you will see that the prophecy deals with the brief and imminent reign of the beast, or antichrist, aided by a false prophet, their persecution of the faithful, their reconstruction of the temple here in Jerusalem and their destruction of the historical centre of Christianity in Rome. This prophecy is the central message of the Apocalypse, and if you wish to go into this in more detail, we will need to meet again for another session.

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[33] The prophecy therefore acts as a 'canon' within the canon.