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John the Revelator Teaches Preaching

LANCE B. PAPE

What can Revelation teach us about preaching? This paper focuses not on how to preach specific texts from the book of Revelation, but rather on the homiletical implications of the peculiar mode of discourse we find in Revelation—the particular way it goes about saying what it has to say. In other words, Revelation will be viewed through the lens of what its literary form can show us about the task of preaching.

One of the first things to note about the book of Revelation is that it is radically different from the kinds of texts with which we are most familiar. Other biblical genres seem more accessible to us, not only because we spend more time in those parts of the canon and so have more practice reading them, but especially because we have similar kinds of literature today. The competence we have developed with cognate genres gives us a head start in making sense of some parts of the Bible. So, for example, New Testament epistles are not the same thing as email, nor are they quite the same as more formal contemporary correspondence, but these modern forms of written communication are close enough to help orient us in our reading of a text like 1 Corinthians. And the canonical gospels (though not fictional in intent) are enough like a contemporary novel in terms of their literary form that we know, almost intuitively, how to approach the realistic narratives we find within them. But what have we ever read that prepares us for making sense of a text like Revelation? How will we approach its trumpets, and diadems, and seals? What are we to do with its bizarre menagerie of dragons, and creatures, and beasts—some with an overabundance of horns which, try as we may, we can never seem to divvy up symmetrically between their many heads?

No doubt Revelation is a strange book. But rather than explaining this strangeness by means of a scholarly recitation of the distinctive characteristics of first-century apocalyptic discourse that make it so unfamiliar to us, I want to highlight the feature that struck me most upon rereading Revelation as I prepared this paper: Revelation is strikingly visual. It is an image-saturated text. *The appeals it makes and the transformations it intends are directed toward the reader's imagination.* This is a feature that should be obvious, but one that can escape notice.

Too often, I think, we get distracted from letting the imagery of Revelation do its work on us because we are in such a hurry to decode it. We tend to think of Revelation as a problematic text that must be solved. If the imagery of the book is construed as a puzzle that must be solved, then the sensible thing to do is to sort things out carefully, analytically, and—above all—dispassionately. This is obviously not the best way to engage an imaginative text, so why do we do it? Perhaps we go this route because we sense that there is a danger in this text, a threat that must be disarmed. We worry, and not without cause, that if it falls into the wrong hands, Revelation will be put to improper use. We know that it has too often been wielded like a weapon by the chronically triumphalistic—those who claim to know too much about God, and who God loves (themselves), and who God hates (their enemies), and every last detail about how and when God will go about getting what God wants. And so we treat Revelation like a gun that needs to be unloaded before someone irresponsible gets ahold of it. The trick to disarming this dangerous text is to explain it—explain it away as a decodable allegory about a distant past. But as long as our agenda is to hold the text at arm's length while we account for every seal, and decipher every horn, and tame every creature, we will be largely immune to what Revelation wants to do to us. Certainly we will be blinded to what Revelation can teach us about preaching.

“Big R” Revelation and “Little r” revelation

What Revelation has to teach us about preaching begins with what it can show us about revelation in general. The book of Revelation can expand our understanding about “little r” revelation, but in order to appreciate this we need to do some thinking about the assumptions we make about how the Bible reveals God. Philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur has observed that Christian talk about the revelatory quality of the Bible has been influenced disproportionately by one biblical genre: the prophetic oracle.¹ The understanding at work in such oracles is that there is another voice at work behind and within the prophet’s voice. When the classic oracular formula is evoked (“Thus says the Lord...”), the reader enters an imaginative contract in which it is understood that what follows is to be received as the utterance not merely of the prophet, but of God through the prophet—as if the prophet were a mouthpiece intoning the very words of God. The crucial point is that this understanding, which is explicitly at work in just one genre, has become paradigmatic for our thinking about other genres as well.

We tend to think of God “speaking” in scripture, not only in the case of the prophetic oracles in which this understanding is made explicit, but also in the case of the proverb, epistle, parable, and so on. We even apply this notion to genres that seem actively to resist it, such as doxology or lament psalm. In fact, this one notion of scripture as the mediation of God’s voice through the language of the text may be so pervasive that we have difficulty appreciating other possibilities for imaginatively grasping how scripture reveals God.

Furthermore, we may be in danger of forgetting not only that there are other helpful and important ways of thinking about how God discloses God’s self to us in scripture, but even of forgetting that this notion of God speaking through the text is *a way of imagining* a mystery, and not the mystery itself. In other words, we may begin to assume that God “speaking” in scripture is a straightforward description, rather than appreciating this notion for what it truly is—a highly suggestive and useful metaphor for expressing some of the mysterious and complicated ways in which the divine will is mediated to us through a text. To lose touch with this understanding is to descend into a naïve biblicism that pretends that what we have in the Bible is not the Word of God (thanks be to God!), but the very words of God—as if God literally had a voice box and the biblical authors were simply taking dictation. This understanding of revelation also tends to be entwined with the assumption that all truth is propositional and that what God wishes to “say” to us is reducible without remainder to argument and proposition—a position that can be correlated to modernity’s bias against the authentic truth-bearing capacity of metaphor and imaginative discourse generally.

But in the case of the book of Revelation we see quite clearly that the paradigm of revelation as God “speaking” is not exhaustive, for the characteristic claim of this testimony is “I saw,” (*eidon*, 35 occurrences) and its characteristic summons is to “Look!” (*idou*: 26 occurrences, but often obscured in translation). When we do look, Revelation makes its bid to redeem our imaginations through an arresting visual display. Image after remarkable image is spread before us like a feast for the eyes. Consider just a few of the striking visual details from the throne room scene: “A sea of glass, like crystal” (4.6, and later somehow “mixed with fire,” 15.2) spreads before a throne upon which sits the One who “looks like jasper and carnelian” (4.10). Lightning flashes from the throne (4.5) even as a rainbow that strangely also “looks like an emerald” (4.3) spreads around it. And as four bizarre creatures “full of eyes front and behind” (4.6) give glory to the One on the throne, the twenty-four white clad elders fall before the throne even as they cast down their golden crowns in worshipful submission (4.10).

Of course we understand that what we have in this scene is not a straightforward descriptive account of the layout of the heavenly courts—as if John of Patmos were supplying to us the biblical equivalent of a mall map, complete with a “God Is Right Here!” arrow pointing to the throne of the Ancient of Days. Nor do we have to do here with a direct visual description of a supernatural being called “God.” God does not look like “jasper and carnelian” any more than God looks like a burning bush or any number of other images supplied in the biblical witness. Indeed, just as God cannot be “named” except by the name that asserts God freedom in the face of our bid to hold God captive to our language (Exodus 3.14), so God is not describable and available

1. Ricoeur, Paul, “Naming God,” in Wallace, Mark I., ed. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 225.

so as to be held under our gaze and for our inspection. God may appear as a scintillating gemlike figure in an apocalyptic vision, or be rendered as a character in any number of biblical narratives, but we should not suppose that God is comprehensively indicated in any of these depictions. “The One with whom we have to do” (Heb 4.13) is not at the mercy of our language, but abides in mystery and beckons to us ineffably from beyond the horizon of all the Bible’s significations.

What, then, does this passage offer if not a handy way to pick God out of a police lineup? It is not easy to answer this question without resorting to banal abstraction, or descending into the tedium of propositions that pretend to know too much. But the answer must surely involve the transformations that accrue to the imagination of anyone who follows the vision willingly, experiences the beauty and awe it mediates, and seeks to be drawn ever more deeply into the world of possibility it displays. None of this has to do with an argument or a set of “claims” about God. This belongs to the order of sight.² We are not supposed systematically to explain this, so much as to experience it, to take it in, and to let it do its work on us. All of it has to do with the work God’s Spirit seeks to perform in us by means of these images—the impact they have in, with, and upon the human imagination.³

Images of the Preacher⁴

One way to think through some of the homiletical implications of what we have been discussing is briefly to sketch some images of the preacher that correspond to these different understandings of the way the Bible reveals God. If we think always or predominantly in terms of God “speaking” in scripture, the image of the preacher that suggests itself most readily is that of the Herald. The task of a Herald is to bear forth the decrees of the king, and to deliver them accurately and without embellishment. The hallmarks of a good Herald are a strong voice, and a willingness to stick to the message as given. The Herald preacher does not waste too much time worrying about how to say what needs to be said. The focus is not on shaping the message in a certain way so that it will have the desired impact, but rather on faithfully transmitting the words given.

But what if we understand that the Bible is often revelatory, not in the sense of “words” that God wants to “speak” to us, but in the sense of a transforming vision that needs to be shared? In that case, other images suggest themselves. We may want to think of the preacher as a Storyteller or even a Poet—someone who shapes language carefully and creatively in the hope of mediating a certain experience. These images help preachers appreciate that rhetorical ambition is not vain and ornamental, but rather essential to the task of preaching.

Another powerful image of the preacher that is sensitive to the diverse ways biblical language discloses God’s will is the Witness. The preacher as Witness first goes to a biblical text with a willingness to witness something—to “see” what it can “show.” Then, having attended with great care to the world the text displays, the Witness returns to the church to bear witness concerning the events experienced in the encounter with the text. Like the Poet and the Storyteller, the Witness, too, will be concerned with the poetics of preaching, for sometimes the only way to keep faith with the beauty and power of what is seen is to muster all of the linguistic resources at one’s disposal in the moment of testimony. And of course, the image of the Witness reminds us that when we preach, our whole selves are caught up into the message. It is no accident that the Greek word for witness, *marturion*, is the root of our English word *martyr*, for the true Witness places her very life on the line. Testimony is most powerful and credible when the Witness herself is transformed by and conformed to the message she speaks.

2. Naturally, this is a visual sensibility that is mediated *linguistically*. Revelation is self-consciously a text (1.11), and my purpose here is not to discuss visual media for preaching, but to explore sermonic uses of language that are better suited to the mode of language we find in certain biblical texts.

3. For a good summary of the crucial role of imagination in preaching, as well as an extensive list of practices intended to nurture the preaching imagination, see Anna Carter Florence, “The Preaching Imagination,” in Thomas G. Long and Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, eds., *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 116–133.

4. This discussion is indebted to the section “Images of the Preacher” in Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 18–51.

Finally, as I have argued elsewhere, the image of the Docent may help us more fully appreciate what is at stake in preaching that seeks to come to term with biblical disclosures that belong to the order of sight.⁵ The role of the Docent is to facilitate a visual encounter—to help others see something more clearly and appreciate it more fully. First, the Docent draws the attention of others toward what is worthy of deeper consideration. Then, the Docent interprets what is seen. He is a hermeneutical expert, but his task is not to tell *about* what only he can see and understand, not to interpose himself *between* the viewers and the object of consideration, but actually to enhance the vision of those he serves—to make it possible for them to see something for themselves. The Docent strives to help others experience something directly in a way that is more rich and affecting than would be possible without his ministrations. The difference between the Witness and the Docent is that while the Witness lays everything on the line to tell us about the truth she has seen, the Docent makes a bid to actually show us the truth that can be seen. The Witness reminds us that in preaching we cannot effectively share something unless we have experienced it for ourselves as transformative. The Docent reminds us that at its best, preaching is not just talking about the reality of God encountered in scripture, but helping others to see it for themselves. Both of these images may prove generative for imagining the task of preaching in fresh ways that resonate with a text like Revelation.

Concluding Unscientific Postscript

One of the most powerful “sermons” I have ever experienced happened unexpectedly in a classroom at Yale Divinity School in the late spring of 1992. On the last day of the semester in the introductory New Testament course, the instructor—a rigorous and normally emotionally-reserved scholar—was lecturing on the book of Revelation. After explaining the distinctive characteristics of apocalyptic discourse, sketching the consensus understanding of the historical context, and carefully working through the structure of the book, he arrived at the final vision of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21.1f). But instead of further exposition, he simply began to read: “See, the home of God is among mortals,” he offered, forming the words slowly and meticulously so as to be understood despite the damage to his surgically repaired jaw and face after the brutal trauma of a car accident the previous year. Some of us knew also that he was struggling to care for a spouse suffering from advanced Alzheimer’s. These had been difficult months. “He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them,” he said, no longer reading. His broken face was raised from the text on the podium now, but he was not looking at us. Instead, his gaze seemed to be fixed beyond us, toward some middle distance of second sight. His eyes were wet, but his voice remained strong as the vision reached its conclusion:

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 Death will be no more;
 mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
 for the first things have passed away.

I do not think I was the only one fighting the temptation to glance behind me, resisting the urge to turn bodily and set my own eyes upon what I knew could not possibly be there yet what *must* be there...for he could clearly see it—not the back of a dusty lecture hall, but the New Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God.”

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5. See Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 132.