Landas 32:1 (2018) 83–103

THE ETERNAL BODY OF MAN IS THE IMAGINATION

Imagining the Book of Revelation through the Eyes of William Blake

Markus E. Locker

Given what is arguably an absence of manifest persecution[1] that usually gives rise to apocalyptic prophecies, the question remains as to what inspired John of Patmos to communicate the "Revelation of Jesus Christ"[2] to seven prominent churches in Asia Minor by means of a book which, for the most part, contains mystifying visions permeated by symbolic imagery and dense figurative language.[3]

---

[1]This position is best explained as follows: "It is less clear whether … [Revelation's] references to persecution refer to the [present] or to the author's expectation for the future.… While no official persecution of Christians was put in motion by Domitian, it is likely that sporadic opposition to Christians took various forms in Roman Asia…" (see "The Book of Revelation," in D. N. Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000], 1126). Along these lines, W. Howard-Brook writes: "Rather, the evidence of both historical documents and the text of Revelation itself suggests that it was seduction by the Roman Empire from within a context of relative comfort, rather than a terrifying persecution, that more accurately describes the situation of the original audience of the book of Revelation" (W. Howard-Brook & A. Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999], xxi–xxii).

[2]This article uses "Revelation," "the Book of Revelation," and "Apocalypse" interchangeably.

[3]One can ask in similar fashion why the Early Church agreed to retain this book in its canon. See especially W. C. Weinrich, "Introduction to the Revelation

https://publications.lst.edu/

Commentators concur that the Book of Revelation is situated in the context of reaction toward heresies that had entered some prominent Christian churches of Asia Minor,[4] yet they continue to disagree on the particular significance of John's visions.[5] Thus, while the epistolary part of the book (chapters 2 and 3) addresses erroneous beliefs, heretical factions, and unacceptable ritual practices found within the communities, this article assumes that the seven letters of the Apocalypse are not only concerned with "what" these heretical doctrines were and how they impacted the early Christian life but also offer a possible insight into "why" certain religious viewpoints that allowed for a compromise with Satan, the Antichrist,[6] could enter Christianity shortly after its inception. In so doing, the letters deal implicitly with the question of how Satan, manifested by the Roman imperial cult, could lose his terrifying and appalling appearance for second generation Christians. The visions of the book (chapters 1 and 4 to 22:5) are consequently believed to be part of the answer. On the whole, the visions of the Book of Revelation seek to restore a divine perspective of history which Christians in the Roman Empire seem to have lost by offering an insight into reality from a lost spiritual vantage point (cf. Rev. 1:10–11; 4:1)—that is, the imagination of faith or, in the

---

to John," in W. C. Weinrich, ed., *Revelation* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 2005), xvii–xx.

[4]The teachings of Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolatians all point to ideologies that advocate a compromise with idolatry practiced within the imperial cult. An interesting view is provided by W. M. Mackay, who sees the names Balaam, Jezebel, and Nicolas as standing for the disvalues of worldliness, false doctrine, and ritualism, respectively (W. M. Mackay, "Another Look at the Nicolaitans," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 45:2 [April–June 1973]: 111–115; see p. 115).

[5]The main approaches in interpreting Revelation are: 1) futurist, 2) historicist, 3) preterist, 4) paschal liturgical, and 5) esoteric. See J. J. Pilch, *What Are They Saying About the Book of Revelation?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

[6]While the term "antichrist" occurs only in the First and Second Letter of John, Revelation's images of the beast are "anti-images" of Christ, the Lamb. See M. E. Locker, "The Lamb of Revelation: In the Light of Peircian Semiotics," *Landas* 16:1 (2002): 65–81.

https://publications.lst.edu/

words of William Blake, the Holy Ghost who grounds and sustains the Christian view of the world. E. R. Wolfson stresses this point further:

> The world of the imaginal is an intermediary realm wherein the imaginative forms (or archetypal images) symbolize the intelligible in terms of the sensory. The primary function of the imagination is hermeneutical: rather than recalling past sense data or combining these data in some innovative and, technically speaking, unexperienced way, the imagination produces symbols of the spiritual entities that act as interpretative filtering screens through which these entities appear in human consciousness. In that respect one can speak of the "symbolizing power of imagination".… Imagination is the faculty through which one opens the boundaries of the phenomenological horizon by producing symbols that express the inexpressible in such ways that there is perfect agreement between the symbol and what is symbolized.[7]

It can be argued that some Christians, in subscribing to reasons that would allow the churches to join certain expressions of imperial worship, effectively obscured the imagination of faith and ultimately lost their newly found freedom in Christ (cf. Rev. 13:17; Gal. 5:1). E. J. Furlong elucidates this phenomenon: "Imagination is freedom, rather than a transcendental category! … [T]o act 'with imagination' is to act with freedom, with spontaneity: it is to break away from the trammels of the orthodox, of the accepted; it is to be original, constructive."[8] The other five churches by contrast, with the exception of Smyrna and Philadelphia, seem to have lost their imagination of faith that inspired and sustained their distinct way of life (Rev. 2:1–13, 19; 3:1, 8) and accepted a standpoint (cf. Rev. 3:15) that allowed for "immorality and [the eating of] food sacrificed to idols" (Rev. 2:14, 21–22).[9]

---

[7]E. R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 62.

[8]E. J. Furlong, *Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1961), 25.

[9]I agree here with Osborne who argues that immorality (*porneusai*, to commit adultery [in Rev. 2:14, 21]) refers to immoral practices while the noun *porneia* in Rev. 2:32 might speak figuratively of idolatry. See G. R. Osborne, *Revelation*,

https://publications.lst.edu/

Reinvigorating the visionary capacity of Christianity through God's revelation, John—returning into the Spirit once again (Rev. 1:10)—does not only challenge the mistaken social, economic, and political goals of first century believers (Rev. 3:17; 18:11–13) but also offers the enduring truth of the Gospel in a familiar but perhaps forgotten way[10] (cf. Rev. 22: 18–19), that is, by means of visions and symbols. As R. G. Collingwood explains, art "is not different to truth; it is essentially the pursuit of truth."[11] The art of Revelation, expressed in its visions, reveals and expresses the truth of the Christian faith that cannot be compromised.

This article does not suggest that Revelation is an explicit apologia for the romantic imagination vis-à-vis scientific rationalism, arguably a concept of modernity that could not have been in the mind of the biblical author.[12] The visionary imagination inherent in John's apocalyptic prophecy[13] is, rather, the timeless human mode and means of challenging the mockery of false religion that is disguised as reason.[14]

Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 157.

[10]See the standard work on Revelation's use of the Old Testament in G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

[11]R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 288.

[12]K. Raine, *Golgonooza, City of Imagination: Last Studies in William Blake* (New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1991), 9–29.

[13]While this article does not engage deliberately in a discussion on the genre of Revelation, it agrees by and large with Mazzaferri that "John dips his hands freely into classical apocalyptic, the synoptic tradition, pagan mythology, and even [several] astral symbols. But he bathes himself in one corpus alone, classical OT prophecy" (F. D. Mazzaferri, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective* [New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989], 378).

[14]I am grateful to Christopher Rowland for helping me to make this necessary clarification.

https://publications.lst.edu/

The Christian Imagination

The question concerning the Christian imagination inevitably leads to the English visionary, poet, and engraver William Blake (1747–1827) whose work is greatly inspired by his imaginative and unrestricted interpretation of the Christian Bible.[15] Christopher Rowland explains Blake's fundamental line of argument regarding imagination as follows: "Allowing reason to triumph over imagination denies a wisdom 'Permanent in the Imagination,' through which one could open Eternal Worlds."[16] Applied to the circumstances of the Book of Revelation, this suggests that a certain type of reasoning, advocated arguably by the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15)—so-called "apostles" (Rev. 2:2), the representatives of Satan (Rev. 2:9, 24), and those who hold the teachings of Balaam (Rev. 2:14) and the woman Jezebel (Rev. 2:20), clouded the imagination of Christianity that would have allowed believers to see a divinely illuminated world and, as a consequence, that Satan was behind the religious institutions and practices of the Roman Empire.[17] In his critique of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Blake contends that institutionalized religion relegates its revolutionary energy to the realm of the diabolic

[15]"For Blake, then, the Bible, despite being the Moral Law, is 'a Poem of probable impossibilities, fabricated … by Inspiration … Poetry & that poetry inspired' … it is the great code or instructive paradigm of art which enables him to synthesise his political and theological outlook into a single, coherent, creative Vision" (M. Farrell, "William Blake and the Bible: Reading and Writing the Law," *Postgraduate English: A Journal and Forum for Postgraduates in English* 13 [2006]: 25).

[16]C. Rowland, "Christology, Controversy and Apocalypse: New Testament Exegesis in the Light of the Work of William Blake," in D. G. Horrell & C. M. Tuckett, eds., *Christology, Controversy and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole*, STNT Vol. XCIX (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 355–378; see pp. 369–370.

[17]For Revelation's Roman background, see J. N. Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, JSNT Sup. Ser. 132 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). See also R. Bauckham, "The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18," in R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), 338–382.

https://publications.lst.edu/

and becomes a history of the restraint of desire (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 5).[18] It may have been the emergent institutionalization of Christianity, therefore—couched in possible compromises with the various institutionalized forms and expressions of the imperial cult and the synagogue of Satan[19]—that allowed justifying a form of life which would have been shunned by an unadulterated faith sustained by the imagination.[20]

Pertaining to the nature of the imagination, Blake's enigmatic scribbles that envelop his engraving *Laocoön* (hereafter referred to as Laoc.) contain the following lines:

> The Eternal Body of Man is the Imagination, that is, God himself,
> the Divine Body, Jesus: we are his Members.
> It manifests itself in his Works of Art. (In Eternity All is Vision).
>
> Prayer is the Study of Art
> Praise is the Practise of Art
> Fasting &c. all relate to Art
> The outward Ceremony is Antichrist (Laoc. K 776).

Blake maintains that, "like the logos, art may be present in objects but must itself be distinguished from them" like how "God himself, the Divine Body, Jesus," is distinguished from outward ceremony and inanimate objects. These might have the form of God yet merely

[18]M. L. Johnson, "*Milton* and Its Contexts," in M. Eaves, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 234. Samples of Blake's works that are referred to in this article may be found at *The William Blake Archive* (http://www.blakearchive.org/).

[19]P. B. Duff argues that John's appellation "synagogue of Satan" refers to Jews from local synagogues. Those synagogues, I believe, have reached a compromise with the Roman Empire that is incompatible with radical Christianity. See P. B. Duff, "'The Synagogue of Satan': Crisis Mongering and the Apocalypse of John," in D. L. Barr, ed., *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 147–168; see p. 147.

[20]See A. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy*, JSNT Supp. Ser. 176 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 189–200.

https://publications.lst.edu/

embody the Antichrist[21]—personified, for example, in the beast in Rev. 13:14—who stands in opposition to the Gospel of Christ.[22] "He [the Antichrist] is Science: The works of Jesus and his followers were destroyed by the Seven Angels of the Seven Churches in Asia; Antichrist Science" (Laoc. K 777). The gift of the Holy Ghost—and indeed the Holy Ghost itself, conversely, is the imagination.[23]

Blake, however, does not separate the spirit from the human person. Unfortunately, the imagination is a neglected and denounced part of the intellect. Hume argues in contrast that "nothing is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination, and nothing has been the occasion of more mistakes among philosophers."[24] Blake, on the other hand, maintains "that Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius" (*All Religions are One*, principle I); "Man's perceptions are not bound by organs of perception. He perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover" (*There is No Natural Religion*, b, I). He concludes:

> The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite.
>
> Application. He who sees the Infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only.
>
> Conclusion. If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.

[21]D. E. James, "Blake's Laocoön: A Degree Zero of Literary Production," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 98:2 (1983): 226–236; see pp. 233–234.

[22]See "Antichrist," in S. F. Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, rev. ed. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 25.

[23]See "Imagination," in Damon, *A Blake Dictionary*, 195.

[24]D. Hume, *The Philosophical Works of David Hume* Vol. I (Edinburgh: Adam Black and William Tait, 1826), 338.

https://publications.lst.edu/

> Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is. (*There is No Natural Religion*)

Blake states empathically that "all that we see is vision, permanent in the Imagination" (Laoc. K 776). Imagination is the "real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow, & in which we all shall live in our Eternal or Imaginative Bodies when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more" (*Jerusalem* 77). It surpasses the boundaries of this world and spreads into eternity. Indeed, Blake's imaginative mind wholly comprehends the ultimate unity of the imagination, divine vision, and the Holy Spirit in the creative act of the poet.

> The true power of the poet is the Imagination, the Divine Vision. "Nature has no Outline, but Imagination has. Nature has no Tune, but Imagination has. Nature has no Supernatural & dissolves: Imagination is Eternity." (*The Ghost of Abel* 1:3)

> In the creative act, it is the completest liberty of the spirit. "Imagination is surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration, who in the aggregate are call'd Jerusalem." (*A Vision of the Last Judgment*, K 604)

For Blake, the Antichrist Science comes to life in the manifestations of Satan masquerading as deity. Only the true imagination, i.e., the spirit of God, can unmask this outward ceremony and grant an eternal vision of God. The imagination is thus found in the creative act of the Christian vision in which the Holy Spirit reveals truth beyond truths. This revelation, Thomas Altizer concludes, is characterized by "a process of subversion and negation of Christian moral, ecclesial, and theological traditions, which are recognized precisely as inversions of Jesus, and therefore as instances of the forms of evil that God-in-Christ overcomes through Incarnation, reversing the Fall."[25]

[25]T. J. J. Altizer, "The Revolutionary Vision of William Blake," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37:1 (2009): 33–38.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Revelation's Letters: Imagination Lost

The Book of Revelation opens with the following verse: "The revelation from/of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what soon must take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John" (Rev. 1:1). God's revelation (*apokalypsis*) is embodied in and through Jesus Christ, who in turn provides this revelation in the form of visions (*deiknumi* in the sense of "to cause to be seen"; cf. *horaō* in Rev. 1:2 and Jn. 2:18) for his servants.[26] Revelation—the Divine Body of Christ in Blake's visualization—is thus made known to John, God's servant, through an angel of Christ (cf. Rev. 22:16). The angels of the Apocalypse mediate and interpret visions[27] and act as agents for implementing divine judgment.[28] They share in the worship of the heavens around the throne of God (Rev. 5:11; 7:11) and never cease to chant: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8–11). They sing a new song praising the worthiness of the Lamb to open the scroll and its seals (Rev. 5:9–10), proclaiming with loud voices that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Rev. 11:15) and crying out "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God" (Rev. 19:1).[29] Christ's Revelation is a living work of art, fully embedded in heavenly song and praise.[30]

---

[26]This follows Giesen's suggestion that "servants" refers not to a select group of prophets but to the seven Christian communities of Asia Minor (H. Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, RNT [Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1997], 99).

[27]Rev. 1:1; 10:1–10; 14:6–11; 17:1, 7–18.

[28]Rev. 7:1–3; 8:2–3; 9:1, 13; 11:15; 12:7–12; 14:15–20; 15:1, 6–7; 18:1–2; 19:17–18; 20:1–3.

[29]S. S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 29.

[30]"The fundamental attitude of praise is, on the one hand, rooted in the conviction that the beginning of the hoped-for salvation is already present. On the other hand, it is rooted in the certainty that God's words are true (Rev. 19:10), and that he remains faithful and true to himself" (M. Hasitschka, "Singing of

https://publications.lst.edu/

The angelic imagination of Christ's revelation to John shows that it comes to pass in a genuinely heavenly manner. Revelation contrasts what Blake calls an "outward ceremony" that is bound to worldly objects (like persuasive logic) with a "practice of art" that exceeds the bounds of conventional reason and wisdom. This, Blake would argue, results in the verbal presence of Christ (Rev. 2:1).[31] The angelic voice communicates God's voice embodied in Christ[32] in the creative act of the spirit (Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3)[33] that shows to God's servants, i.e., believers who are open to the prophetic gift of the spirit (cf. Rev. 22:9), "what must take place" (Rev. 1:1; 4:1; 22:6).[34]

Redemption in the Midst of Tribulation," in M. E. Locker, ed., *Led by the Spirit* [Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 2002], 138–140).

[31]"Blake's idea of verbal presence, the only real existence of the past, he no doubt took from his reading of the Bible. Blake interprets Jesus's second coming as His continual presence in the presence of the Book itself. Blake has nothing good to say about the historical or so-called past Jesus, who is the supreme form of Antichrist. He is 'outward ceremony,' meaningless ritualized behavior that mindlessly copies or points out and backward to an historically lost and forgotten or only vaguely remembered event. The opposite of this would be a shaped imaginative form, living in the immediate present, like the Bible and what it contains" (H. Adams, "Blake and the Philosophy of Literary Symbolism," *New Literary History* 5:1 [Autumn, 1973]: 135–146; see p. 140).

[32]"[The chain of communication in v. 1] … probably explains why in some sayings later in the book it is difficult to discern whether the speaker is God, Christ, or an angel, since the message actually derives from all three" (G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, TNGTC [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 183).

[33]R. Jeske shows that the expression "in the Spirit" signifies a relational symbol which, *inter alia*, denotes the churches' reception of Christ's revelation rather than John's state of ecstasy. See R. L. Jeske, "Spirit and Community in the Johannine Apocalypse," *New Testament Studies* 31:3 (1985): 452–466; see p. 463.

[34]Concerning the pragmatic connotation of this phrase, see M. E. Locker & C. Sedmak, "The Language-Game of Revelation: Interpreting the Book of Revelation through Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language," *Philosophy and Theology* 13:2 (2001): 241–262; see p. 253. Locker and Sedmak argue for the

https://publications.lst.edu/

Blake's aesthetics offer another inspiring insight here. Influenced by the German mystic Jacob Böhme and the English theologian William Law, Blake holds that Man's imaginative powers are diminished and his artistic faculties blunted through the "Fall" into matter, which is symbolized in the distinction of sexes.[35] "Adam is only The Natural Man & Not the Soul or Imagination" (Laoc. K 776). Blake, as Désirée Hirst explains, believes that

> to regain his former integrity, his original androgynous condition and the freedom of his native spiritual estate, Man has to practise the forgiveness of sins in imitation of Christ and destroy the Satan within himself. He repairs the divisions of his own nature through the use of the creative imagination, the faculty least spoilt by the Fall.[36]

The angelic mediation of God's revelation speaks directly (Rev. 1:10) to the spiritual body of Man and his imagination as it is redeemed in due course by Christ and freed from sin (Rev. 1:5; 5:9). As a vessel of this angelic mediation of Christ's revelation, John of Patmos becomes a supreme artist who discloses what a true Christian is according to Blake:

> A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect: the Man or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian. (Laoc. K 76)

---

grammatical similarity between and family resemblance of "what must be done" and "what must take place" in Revelation.

[35]W. Law writes:

> [The human person] was created an Angel, both as to body and spirit, and this Angel stood in an outward body, of the nature of the outward world, and therefore by the nature of his state he had his trial, or power of choosing whether he would live as an Angel, using only his outward body as a means of opening the wonders of the outward world to the glory of his creator, or whether he would turn his desire to the opening of the bestial life of the outward worldling.… (W. Law, "The Spirit of Prayer," in W. Law, *The Pocket William Law* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950], 116, cited in D. Hirst, "On the Aesthetics of Prophetic Art," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 4:3 [1964]: 248–252)

[36]Hirst, "On the Aesthetics of Prophetic Art," 251.

https://publications.lst.edu/

Hirst gets to the heart of Blake's Christian aesthetics: "'The theologian may be the theoretician of the sacred. But is not the artist a practitioner in this medium?'"[37] It is only in true art that "all Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the Divine Body of the Saviour, the true Vine of Eternity, the Human Imagination" (*A Vision of the Last Judgment* 605–606).

After John conveys grace and peace from Christ to the seven churches (Rev. 1:4), he immediately calls all Christians to give glory and dominion to Christ for ever and ever (Rev. 1:6). He elucidates that it is Christ who "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Rev. 1:5–6). Accepted in faith, Christ's redemptive deed will allow Christians here and now to foretaste the kingdom of God (cf. Jn. 3:3–5) and have a glimpse of the heavenly reign of God.[38] Those who have rejected Christ, however, will see him only on the day of his final coming (Rev. 1:7). The gift of the imagination, necessary for seeing and hearing what Christ says (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 20, 22; 13:9 in connection with Mk. 4:1–9 par.), is not available to those without faith.[39]

John by and large finds a church in tribulation[40] (Rev. 1:9) in which the gift of the imagination is about to be, or has already been, lost.

---

[37]Hirst, "On the Aesthetics of Prophetic Art," 25.

[38]Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 79.

[39]"[The] parables are mysteries … and hidden realities … not because they refer to a hitherto concealed reality, or because already forty years after the death of Jesus their original setting was forgotten, but because their understanding necessitates that the hearer has already become a disciple of the kingdom of God. Only then can one see (*idou*) and understand … what remains unseen to those outside" (M. E. Locker, *The New World of Jesus' Parables* [Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008], 17–18).

[40]Consequently, this notion of "tribulation" could allude to Emanuel Swedenborg's reading of affliction in Rev. 1:9: "'In affliction, and in the kingdom, and the patient expectation of Jesus Christ' signifies who in the church are infested by evils and falsities, but these are to be removed by the Lord, when he comes" (see E. Swedenborg, *Apocalypse Revealed: Wherein are Disclosed the Arcana*

https://publications.lst.edu/

Accosted by the anti-Christian and thoroughly evil ideology of the Roman imperial cult, the imagination of Christianity—the eternal body of the Church—was about to perish. Blake is very well aware of this problem:

> The Nature of Visionary Fancy, or Imagination, is very little Known, & the Eternal nature & permanence of its ever Existent Images is consider'd as less permanent than the things of Vegetative & Generative Nature; yet the Oak dies as well as the Lettuce, but its Eternal Image & Individuality never dies, but renews by its seed; just … so the Imaginative Image returns … by the seed of Contemplative Thought; the Writings of the Prophets illustrate these conceptions of the Visionary Fancy by their various sublime & Divine Images as seen in the Worlds of Vision. (*A Vision of the Last Judgment* 68–69)

Christ sees that the church of Ephesus, for example, has abandoned its first love and fallen from this condition:

> But I have this against you; that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. (Rev. 2:4–5)

What follows from "love" in v. 5 indicates that *agapē* in the first of the letters to the seven churches might simply signify neither brotherly love,[41] works of love,[42] nor zeal for doctrinal truth;[43] rather, as G. K. Beale argues, it gives testimony to the presence of Christ in the world (cf. Eph. 3:19; Eph. Ignatius 1:1).[44] Love of God and not of the world (cf. 1 Jn. 2:15) is the *topos* of the imagination of faith that the Church deserted in favor of an outlook that appears to tolerate the absence

---

There Foretold which have Hitherto Remained Concealed Vol. 1, trans. J. Whitehead [West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2009], 26).

[41]See, among many others, C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, TBRS (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 41.

[42]Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 57.

[43]Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 61.

[44]Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 230.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of good works, thereby making it evil. The loss of the first love, then, arguably resulted in the cessation of the Gospel's promulgation. The Ephesian community has fallen from heaven (cf. Isa. 14:12), the divine vantage point,[45] a place where it was a witnessing lampstand (Rev. 2:5; cf. Zech. 4:1–6).[46] Leaving one's first love is thereby indicative of the suppression of the spiritual gifts that are necessary for the community's authentic witness of Christ (cf. Eph. 5:18–19). This loss of the Christian vision is unacceptable for John; for him, it is tantamount to condemnation and the deprivation of salvation. Loss of the imagination is loss of humanity, a deficiency that has practical consequences: the works that the Church did at first are also lost; they, too, must be resumed.

A similar observation can be made regarding the church of Laodicea's failure to realize that their apparent riches are fool's gold. The church's lukewarmness (Rev. 3:16) brought about by the loss of grace is the condition that causes the imagination of faith to fail.[47] The true nature of worldly and spiritual things thus remains hidden from the community. The remedy for this deficiency as such is "gold refined by fire … white garments … salve to anoint your eyes" (Rev. 3:18). Witnessing, suffering, righteous deeds (Rev. 19:8), and spiritual remedy

[45]In his classic work on the letters of Revelation, W. M. Ramsay writes: "The Church was enthusiastic; but it has been cooling. It has fallen from its high plane of conduct and spirit" (W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and Their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse*, rev. ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994], 25). A similar view is held by R. L. Thomas who argues that the Ephesian Church, having lost its first love, is "devoid of spiritual life" (R. L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1992], 142).

[46]In Zech. 4:1–6, the lampstands generally represent the power of the spirit. Cf. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 231.

[47]Oecumenius, in his *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, writes: "He [John] calls that person lukewarm who in baptism received the communion of the Holy Spirit but has quenched that grace through sloth and attention to temporal matters" (T. C. Oden, ed., *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, Ancient Christian Texts, trans. W. C. Weinrich [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011], 19).

https://publications.lst.edu/

will cure the shameful state of the Church and provide the Laodicean Christians with true riches[48] which will allow them once again to hear what the Spirit says (Rev. 3:22).

Taking a cue from the state of the Ephesian and Laodicean churches, one can surmise that Christianity in Asia Minor as a whole[49] had partially lost the gift of the imagination and succumbed to the idols of the Antichrist who speaks to every tribe, people, tongue, and nation and seduces them into worshipping him (Rev. 13:5–9). There is still, however, a vestige of the imaginative power of the Church—in Ephesus, for instance, the Church abhors the works of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6).[50] There is still hope. The Church must listen both to what the Spirit says to all churches and what John prophesies (Rev. 10:11).[51] If it does, then Christ will grant the Church to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God (Rev. 2:8).[52] If the Church regains its power of the imagination, it can once again partake in the salvation offered by Christ, i.e., the new creation.

It is noteworthy that John does not see a "temple in the city" (Rev. 21:22) whose "gates shall never be shut by day" (Rev. 21:25) in his final vision of the New Jerusalem. Apart from its eschatological significance, this unusual feature of the New Jerusalem[53]—in contrast

---

[48]For the meaning of the remedial gifts, see Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 313–314 and D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC Vol. 52 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997), 259–260.

[49]Cf. the concluding verse of all seven letters: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

[50]Concerning the Nicolaitan heresy, see Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 100–104.

[51]I have argued elsewhere that Revelation does not—indeed cannot—foretell the future (Locker & Sedmak, "The Language-Game of Revelation," 254).

[52]The prize for all victorious churches is taken from the imagery of the New Jerusalem, Rev 21.

[53]Kraft, for example, believes that John must have committed a logical error in connecting the closing of the gates to the daytime (H. Kraft, *Die Offenbarung*

https://publications.lst.edu/

with the oppressive system of the imperial cult (cf. Rev. 13:17)—might also serve as a subtle warning against any future institutionalization of the faith patterned after worldly or political forms of religion. Christ alone embodies the spiritual temple of God;[54] participation in any other temple worship results in the loss of the imagination, thereby justifying the logic of compromise with the imperial cult.

The Book of Revelation's Sublimity and Beauty: Imagination Found Again

The Book of Revelation continues to stimulate the imagination of Christians by leading them concurrently to experiences of the "sublime" and of "beauty." Being in the Spirit, the seer "hears a loud voice like a trumpet" behind him (Rev. 1:10). This imagery recalls Ex. 20:18, depicting the frightening presence of God whose voice is feared and would cause death. Moses, however, assures his people: "Do not fear; for God has come to prove you and that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin" (Ex. 20:19). Likewise, John's fear of seeing "one like a son of man" (Rev. 1:17) is abated by a vision of utmost beauty: "a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat on the throne appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald" (Rev. 4:2b–3). The throne is surrounded by twenty-four elders also sitting on thrones and four living creatures who give praise incessantly to God.

John's visionary experience can be likened to what Immanuel Kant diagnoses as "mathematical sublimity," that is, the experience of cognitive exhaustion.[55] Sublimity relates to a passage toward an "ideal,"

---

des Johannes, HZNT 16a [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1974]).

[54]P. Lee, *The New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation: A Study of Revelation 21–22 in the Light of its Background in Jewish Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 282.

[55]L. Poland, "The Idea of the Holy and the History of the Sublime," *The Journal of Religion* 72:2 (April 1992): 175–197.

https://publications.lst.edu/

whether to God or the supersensible, "by means of what the eighteenth century called 'enthusiasm.'"[56] Enthusiasm, Lynn Poland explains, "has no clear locus or cause … it arouses the soul."[57] The sublime evokes ambivalent feelings of terror and delight in the beholder; it arises out of the failure of the beautiful. In terms of Revelation, it is the Spirit that resurrects and purifies the imagination through visions of extreme beauty and terror.[58] This spiritual stance illumines the divine sphere and unmasks evil masquerading as beauty (cf. Rev. 17:6). Kant thus alerts us that "while the beautiful object symbolically presents a 'final' correspondence between the ideal and the real, the sublime instead provokes an experience of the immeasurable gulf between them."[59]

Revelation speaks of this hiatus in terms of a war in heaven (Rev. 12:7–8) that, though won by Michael and his angels, continues on earth.[60] Two terrifying beasts threaten those Christians who are not yet defiled by evil (Rev. 13), yet believers are saved by joining in the singing of a "new song" before the throne of God (Rev. 14:3) and in the proclamation of an eternal gospel (Rev. 14:6). Plagues are thereupon cast upon the world (Rev. 15–16), and judgment is rendered upon the "great harlot." Here the ambivalence of sublimity becomes supremely visible: a woman arrayed in regal purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls is found sitting on an abominable beast full

[56]S. K. Saxena, "Hegel on the Sublime," *Religious Studies* 10:2 (June 1974): 153–172.

[57]Saxena, "Hegel on the Sublime," 177.

[58]A similar vision of the imagination, "cultivated" and "'purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic'—through 'familiarity' … with the 'finest specimens of poetry and philosophy,'" i.e., the sublime, is entertained by Percy Bysshe Shelley. See C. Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 76–77.

[59]Saxena, "Hegel on the Sublime," 178.

[60]See A. Y. Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1976); A. K. W. Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11:1–14:5* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 124–130.

https://publications.lst.edu/

of blasphemous names (Rev. 17:3), "holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication" (Rev. 17:4) and with a name of mystery (*noma mustērion*) written upon her forehead (Rev. 17:5).[61] John is "amazed" with "great amazement" ('*kai ethaumata idōn autēn thauma mega*' Rev. 17:6) in beholding the woman, but the angel who showed the beast and the woman to John questions his astonishment. While mortals without faith will indeed marvel when looking at the beast, it is but an ungodly earthly reality in disguise (Rev. 17:9–18), that only mimics divinity (Rev. 13:11–15). Revelation's gift of the imagination grants the "wisdom" that is needed to see through the disguise of evil (Rev. 7:9; 13:18). Indeed, the true mystery of God (Rev. 10:7) is the mystery of Christ in the Church (cf. Rev. 1:20).

After witnessing a final conflict and judgment (Rev. 19:11–20:15), John receives a profound vision of beauty—God dwells among humankind in a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1–9). The seer is shown a New Jerusalem of utmost exquisiteness coming down from heaven (Rev. 21:10), a city that has the "glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal" (Rev. 21:11). It has perfect proportions (Rev. 21:16–17) and is built with the most precious materials (Rev. 21:18–21). Thus, while the sublime is purposivelessness, beauty according to Kant has purposiveness.[62] Unlike the encounter with the sublime that "does violence to our imagination," the beautiful is "pre-adaptable to our judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction."[63] The city offers limitless access to God (Rev. 21:22); the Glory of God is its light, and its spirit is Christ, the Lamb (Rev. 21:23).

---

[61]See L. R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 56–88.

[62]R. Gilmore, "Philosophical Beauty: The Sublime in the Beautiful in Kant's Third *Critique* and Aristotle's *Poetics*," *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Arts*. Available at https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Aest/AestGilm.htm.

[63]T. Cohen, "Why Beauty is a Symbol of Morality," in T. Cohen & P. Guyer, eds., *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 221–236.

https://publications.lst.edu/

The experiences of sublimity and beauty have profound pragmatic dimensions. The horrific visions of judgment and evil call Christians to distance themselves from the lures of the beast that enslaves all (Rev. 13:16–17) and traffics in human souls (Rev. 18:13). True believers are called to "come out" of Babylon, the great whore, lest they partake in her sins and share in her plagues (Rev. 18:4). Love of God leaves only hate for Satan and his works (Rev. 2:6).

The sublime, on the other hand, conjoins the ideal and the real not simply as a possibility in the future but as an opportunity in the present. Revelation's presentation of what "must take place" (Rev. 1:1; 4:1; 21:4) in visions of beauty and sublimity is a call for Christians to join and collaborate in the inbreaking "dwelling of God among men" (Rev. 21:3) that will find its fulfilment at the end of time. Revelation's New Jerusalem is, on account of its unlimited beauty, a universal vision (cf. Rev. 21:24) of an ideal "form of life,"[64] one that calls Christians into the "habit"[65] of "keeping the words of this book" (Rev. 1:3; 3:3; 22:9) and the commandments of God (Rev. 12:17; 14:12).[66]

Conclusion

An "aesthetics of the Apocalypse," anchored in Blake's understanding of the role of the imagination and of its loss through

[64]Wittgenstein's notion of language-game explains the connection between a particular form of language and a thereupon resulting form of life. Cf. M. E. Locker, "Jesus' Language-Games: The Significance of the Notion of Language-Game for a Reformulation of 'New Testament Biblical Theology,'" *The Heythrop Journal* 50:3 (2009): 392–401.

[65]C. S. Peirce explains: "A Symbol incorporates a habit, and is indispensable to the application of any *intellectual* habit, *at least*" (C. S. Peirce, "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism" [CP 4.531 1906], in C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* Vol. 4 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933], 414). See M. E. Locker, "Revelation's New Jerusalem: A Sign-Model of Christian Identity," *Semiotics* (2003): 234–242.

[66]Locker, "Revelation's New Jerusalem," 234–242.

https://publications.lst.edu/

an emerging institutionalization of faith, provides some insight into possible reasons as to why the New Testament comes to a close with the intensely imaginative "Revelation of God." The truth that is revealed through Christ's Incarnation, passion, death, and Resurrection, narrated and proclaimed in the Gospels and Acts and illuminated in the correspondences of the apostles with the Christian churches through visions of the sublime, utmost beauty, and unfathomable terror, is returned into the "Imagination, the Eternal Body," of the believer. There alone will faith become wisdom for embodying and living the Gospel of Christ in the world. Rowland puts it succinctly as follows:

> It is when [Revelation's] visionary experience informs a sense of the incompatibility of human action and divine justice that the prophet speaks, when, as Blake put it, one sees through the eye and not with it, and ordinary things become transformed in the divine light, whether of salvation or judgment. Blake is a compelling example of the prophetic vocation ready to bear witness to the Beast and Babylon in his midst.[67]

Such witnessing, even to martyrdom, will allow the imagination of faith to afford Christians a foretaste of paradise and life in eternity by closing the imaginative circle that begins with the story of creation and ends with God's new handiwork.[68] This heavenly vista grounds and issues acts of love and charity, and assures salvation that alone belongs to God (Rev. 7:10; 12:10; 19:1).

This article as such will remain largely theoretical in the end unless it is read side-by-side with Blake's awe-inspiring watercolors and illustrations.[69] Only then does the main argument of this essay

---

[67]C. Rowland, "William Blake and Ezekiel's *Merkabah*," in P. M. Joyce & A. Mein, eds., *After Ezekiel: Essays on the Reception of a Difficult Prophet* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 245.

[68]Lee, *The New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation*, 295.

[69]"The Ancient of Days" (1794); "The Four and Twenty Elders Casting their Crowns before the Divine Throne," "The Resurrection," "The Angel of the Revelation" (ca. 1803); "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun" (1805); "Death on a Pale Horse," "Christian Beaten Down by Apollyon," "The Number of the Beast is 666," "The Great Red Dragon

https://publications.lst.edu/

become clear—to borrow Marshall MacLuhan's famous aphorism, "Revelation's medium is its message."[70]

and the Beast from the Sea," "The River of Life" (ca. 1805); "The Vision of the Last Judgement," "The Casting of the Rebel Angels into Hell" (1808); "The Whore of Babylon" (1809).

[70]A phrase originally coined by M. MacLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 7.

https://publications.lst.edu/