

MISSION PERSPECTIVE IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

by JAMES DU PREEZ

THIS paper is a résumé of the most important findings, briefly illustrated, of an unpublished thesis with the above title written in Afrikaans, which was presented for the doctorate in theology of the University of Stellenbosch, Professor W. J. van der Merwe, Ph.D., being the promoter. A slightly briefer summary was published in Afrikaans in the "Nederlands Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif" X/1 (January, 1969). Dr. du Preez is Rector of the Decoligny Theological School, Umtata, Transkei, South Africa.

INTRODUCTORY¹

The Science of Missions, during the past few decades, has paid particular attention to the scriptural basis of the missionary enterprise. Yet, thus far, the book of Revelation has not received the attention it deserves. However, if we consider that the Kingdom of God is the principal theme of the Bible, reaching its climax in the last book; that the missionary task is increasingly—and rightly so—being viewed in its eschatological context; that there is a thread of universalism that runs even through various non-canonical Jewish apocalyptic books (as shown, for instance, by M. A. Beek and D. S. Russell); that Revelation, like the other apostolic letters, was written in the mission field; all this, we say, makes it imperative that mission perspective should also be investigated in the book of Revelation.

In the last book of the Bible God revealed Himself in a language which took account of the cultural background and the circumstances of the Churches of Asia Minor. (Thus e.g. the expression "throne of Satan" in Rev. 2: 13 is an allusion either to the 40 feet high altar of Zeus in Pergamum, or to the temple of Asclepios, the god of healing, with a snake as emblem, or especially to Caesar's temple in the same city, or to all three of these.)

Now J. de Zwaan regards Revelation as a missionary book in the

¹ In ch. 1 of the thesis of which this a résumé we have (a) the problem stated, (b) method of dealing therewith, (c) character of book discussed (an apocalyptic-prophetic letter), (d) the writer (probably the apostle John), (e) time (\pm A.D. 95) and (f) important principles of interpretation, while (g) closes with a discussion of J. de Zwaan's view of the missionary purpose of the book. In this résumé only (g) can receive more attention.

sense that it was written to stress the unparalleled greatness of Jesus in contrast to various figures in the Persian-Chaldean astral mythology (in his *De Openbaring van Johannes*, Haarlem, 1929). Thus e.g. the rider in ch. 6: 2 is for him the Persian sun-god Mithras, who is supposed to traverse the heavens as the invincible rider on his white horse, but who nevertheless falls under the direct rule of the Christ, the real *Sol Invictus*. This view cannot be accepted without another word. Although pagan mythological material is used elsewhere in Scripture for purposes of contrast (e.g. Isa. 14: 13; 51: 9-10; Ezek. 28: 14-16), our knowledge of the state of things at the end of the first century A.D. is too limited to be sure that the above was God's object with the book of Revelation. Furthermore, the following considerations contradict De Zwaan's opinion: firstly, that all the passages to which he refers (e.g. the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, the four horsemen) can be explained quite naturally without reference to any mythology, while his own interpretation, more often than not, savours of artificiality; secondly, that the above-mentioned object of the book of Revelation would apply to only a small part of the book; thirdly, that God's revelation of Himself is in any case *always* "implicitly polemic" (Th. A. Nicholas); fourthly, that Revelation can in a sense rather be called an attack on the deification of Caesar.

I

A summary of the main part of the thesis now follows, beginning with an exposition of the following statement: *God causes His Kingdom to come by means of His universal Covenant sovereignty.*

A comparison between the covenant structure of the O.T. and Revelation (making use of our knowledge of the forms of agreement in the Ancient Near East but at the same time remembering that God's covenant revelation is unique) shows that one of the main truths that permeates Revelation is the concept of the Covenant and thus also of the sovereignty of God: God reveals Himself in Christ as King of His people via the Covenant, He lets His Kingdom come *through the Covenant of grace.*

This can be seen from examples such as the following: God's introduction of Himself in Rev. 1: 8 ("who is and who was and who is to come")—a rendering of the name YHWH (Ex. 3: 14-15), which recalls a similar introduction of Himself as the God of the Covenant on Mt. Sinai in Ex. 20: 2; then the expression "these words" (Rev. 22: 6), which is reminiscent of the Hebrew *dbrm* (words) used for the clauses of a treaty (e.g. Deut. 29: 9, 29); the words of blessing and of doom in the seven letters of Rev. 2-3,

which remind us of similar blessings and curses contained in the Old Covenant; the warnings in connection with this book of Revelation (Rev. 22: 19), which recall those of Deuteronomy, the Covenant book *par excellence* (4: 2; 12: 32; 29: 20); and then the striking description of the End in 11: 12-19, where the sovereignty of God and His Covenant are so clearly seen to be vitally connected.

The sovereignty of God by means of the Covenant is *universal*, because here He manifests Himself as Lord of *history*. That is to say:

(a) Firstly, He is the Lord of the *time* in which all of history is enacted.

We see this: (i) from words and phrases like the following: "revelation" (*apokalupsis*), "that which is to take place soon" (*en tachei*: quickly, within a short while), "I am coming soon": (ii) from words indicating time: 1,260 days, forty-two months, "a time and times and half a time", a thousand years—expressions which, whatever else they may mean, all show that *He* sets the limit; (iii) from divine appellations such as: "He who is and who was and who is to come", "the Alpha and the Omega", "the Beginning and the End".

(b) Secondly, He is the Lord of all *powers* which operate in the making of history.

This is more than apparent in chap. 4, where the Throne of the Covenant governs everything else, e.g. the four living creatures which probably symbolize the whole living creation as it will one day offer perfect praise to God—praise not forced but spontaneous, thankful and holy (4: 8-9). We see this Lordship, too, in portions like 11: 18; 17: 8, 12-14; 16-17; 20: 7-10, in which one is tempted to see divine "humour": the very moment we read of the seemingly unconquerable powers opposed to God, His Christ and His Church, we may also read of their final defeat! In this connection the expression: "the Lord our God, sovereign over all, *has entered on his reign*" (N.E.B., 19: 6: *ebasileusen*, aorist), when read in the context of the whole Bible, can only be interpreted as the manifestation of God's eternal power in its final and terrible revelation in this world (cf. also 11: 15-17).

God's right to covenant sovereignty rests primarily on the fundamental fact that He is the *Creator*, i.e. God of the beginning (4: 11; 10: 6; 14: 7), and therefore God of all that follows. A corollary of this right, and really one with it, is the *re-creation* through the Lamb, so clearly manifest in Rev. 5. Thus in 5: 6 John sees a *Lamb* standing, as though it had been *slain*, while His Spirit is at work in all the world—a clear indication of the universal

renewal wrought by the sufferings, death and resurrection of the Christ of God (cf. 5: 9). As the song of praise in 4: 11 proclaims God worthy of reigning over everything because He is the Creator, so in the songs of Rev. 5: 9-12 the Lamb is proclaimed worthy to reign because He is the Saviour. One can differentiate between these two, but not separate them. Revelation is the book of the throne of God and of the Lamb (22: 1, 3). The mystery of the exalted Lamb is a God-centred mystery. God the Creator created through His Son (3: 14), and God the Saviour re-created through His Son, to restore creation to its original purpose: the glorification of God (cf. 21 :1-22: 5—the climax of God's plan for all creation contained in the scroll of 5: 1-3).

II

For this purpose—that He might be glorified—God, by virtue of His right to reign as universal Lord of the Covenant in Christ, gathers from all nations a universal covenant people, i.e., a people drawn from Jews and Gentiles alike.

We see this universal covenant people, e.g. in the following:

(a) *The seven churches in Asia Minor* (Rev. 2-3). In the Bible the number 7 generally serves as a symbol of the perfection and completeness of God's covenant dealings in the world, and in the case of the seven churches refers specifically to a definite number 7 used in covenant structuring: the seven lamps of the golden lampstand in the tabernacle (1: 20), which also represent the Spirit (1: 4) working universally in the world for the sake of a universal Kingdom (5: 6; cf. Zech. 4: 10; 2 Chron. 16: 9). The "One like a Son of Man" in 1: 13, standing in the midst of the lampstands, is identical with the figure of the Messiah as portrayed in Dan. 7: 13 (cf. Mk. 14: 62). In Dan. 7 as well as in Rev. 1 we see him united to his covenant people in a most wonderful way (cf. Dan. 7: 14, 18, 22, 27; Rev. 1: 12-13). Thus in his person both the true Israel of the old dispensation and the universal Israel of the new dispensation are guaranteed because of both his grace and his judgments operative in the world (Rev. 1: 12-18; cf. also Rev. 14: 14-20; Matt. 25: 31-46). Partly because of its close relation to Dan. 7, Rev. 1 shows us the N.T. form of the O.T. covenant people. And so the characteristics of God's old covenant people are applicable to those of the new, as is indeed demonstrated by the universal way in which Revelation applies O.T. terms such as "my servants" (2: 20), "my people" (18: 4), "you who fear Him" (19: 5), "the saints" (5: 18).

When we read further in Rev. 2: 9 and 3: 9 that the unbelieving,

malignant Jews of Smyrna and Philadelphia are called "a synagogue of Satan" and that 3: 9 also applies to the Jews the words of Is. 60: 14 (words written about the Gentiles, that they will "come and bow down before your feet"), then a significant truth is hereby made plain: that Christ's people from all nations, as represented in the seven churches of Rev. 2-3, are a *continuation* of the original covenant people in so far as they (the old) were Israel according to the *Spirit*, but that the new people *replace* those of the Old Covenant in so far as these belonged, or still belong, to Israel only according to the *flesh*. It is belief in Christ which determines who really belong to God's spiritual Israel, not Gentile or Jewish ancestry.

(b) *The twenty-four elders* (4: 4). These elders seem to be clearly distinguished from *all* the angels in 7: 11. If the reading "us" (*hēmas*) of Codex Aleph and others in Rev. 5: 9 should be correct, there would be no doubt as to the identity of the elders, for in that case they would be clearly identified as a people "from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation". However, being called elders (*presbuteroi*), they nevertheless most probably represent believers (cf. Ex. 19: 7-8, LXX; Acts 14: 23) who have been victorious until the end—for the crowns (*stephanoi*) and white robes point to final victory (cf. 2: 10; 3: 4, 11). As priest-kings (cf. 4: 4 with 5: 8) they are to be associated—perhaps *via* the twenty-four divisions of priests in 1 Chron. 24—with the "kingdom of priests" in Ex. 19: 6, which expression, though in a varied form, is applied to Gentile believers as well (1 Pet. 2: 9). In this way they represent the whole Church "which one day in glory will praise and worship in the presence of God Himself".

(c) *The one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed of Rev. 7: 1-8*. The following considerations make it probable that they represent the Church of all nations: that Rev. 7: 1-8 is the answer to the universal question in 6: 17 regarding who could stand before God's wrath; that judgment is deferred throughout the whole world in 7: 1; that it is necessary for every child of God to be sealed in order to persevere until the end (Eph. 4: 30); that the name "servants" in v. 3 is used, in 22: 3 and elsewhere, to indicate all believers; that priority is given to Judah; that Dan is left out; that the figure 144,000 is used in a symbolical sense.

(d) *The great multitude from every nation* (Rev. 7: 9-17). In 7: 1-8 John hears the number of those who were sealed with a view to the coming tribulation (cf. 7: 1-4); in 7: 9-17 John sees how many this victorious number is and whom it actually represents: an innumerable multitude from all nations (v. 9). There is much

in 7: 9-17 that reminds us of the cheerful Israelite Feast of Tabernacles (cf. Lev. 23: 40-43 with Rev. 7: 9-10, 15). And although fulfilled by way of a great prolonged oppression (7: 14), we have here indeed the final and glorious revelation of the universal Feast of Tabernacles of which Zechariah once so boldly prophesied (14: 16).

(e) *The one hundred and forty-four thousand on Mount Zion* (14: 1-5). The 144,000 of this passage seem to be identical with the group mentioned in 7: 1-8, because of the same number used, because of the context, and because of the reference to the foreheads. Then, too, we see them standing on *Zion—Zion* which is symbolical of God's eschatological universal Kingdom: Ps. 87; Is. 2: 1-4, etc. Finally a comparison between 14: 4 and 5: 9-10 (about being purchased from among men) marks these "first-fruits for God and the Lamb" as God's elect from all nations, hallowed to Him and set apart from the unbelieving world which is not dedicated to Him.

(f) *The woman and the "rest of her offspring"* (Rev. 12: 1-17). The child in Rev. 12 is none other than the Christ-child. The woman thus symbolizes on the one hand the O.T. believers, including Mary, the mother of Jesus; on the other hand she also symbolizes the N.T. believers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, because of the universal terminology used here (cf. vv. 9 and 12) in a passage (vv. 7-12) where events run parallel to those described in vv. 1-6 of the same chapter. This woman of Rev. 12 symbolizes the holy, universal counterpart of the universal harlot of Rev. 17-19, the wicked city of harlots, Babylon, within whose bounds were people of all races (17: 2; 18: 3). In prophetic retrospect the sublime yet persecuted woman of Rev. 12 is the mother of the Messiah; but when the prophetic eye looks forward, she is seen as the bride of the Lamb (19: 7), the holy city of Jerusalem (21: 9-10) filled with people of all nations (21: 24, 26), with God Himself as her glory and the Lamb as her lamp (21: 23). As regards "the rest of her offspring" (v. 17), just as in Scripture the terms "city of Jerusalem" and "her children" are used interchangeably (Is. 54: 1-3, 13; 66: 8; Gal. 4: 26), so the offspring of v. 17 is identical with the woman herself and thus with the universal people of God from all nations. (The somewhat difficult expression "the rest of her seed" is made plain if it be remembered that it is used of all Christians in contrast to the First-born of 12: 5.)

(g) *The twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles in 21: 12-14*. These two groups probably each represent the universal people of

God. As regards the first group, see point (c), and note also that their names are written on the twelve *gates*, showing who are allowed to enter: "all those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21: 27). The twelve apostles point backwards to the twelve tribes of the old dispensation, but also forward to the eschatological Israel from all nations. Thus they represent the true Israel of God, in past, present and future.

Summarizing the above, it can be said: the universal people of God are seen as the still *struggling* Church on earth (*ecclesia militans*) in the seven churches of Asia Minor, the 144,000 Israelites of 7: 1-8, and the woman of Rev. 12; they are also seen as the perfected triumphant Church in heaven (*ecclesia triumphans*) as symbolized by the twenty-four elders, the multitude without number (7: 9-17), the 144,000 on Mt. Zion (14: 1-5), the names of the twelve tribes of Israel in 21: 12 and of the twelve apostles in 21: 14. These visions of the universal Church triumphant aim at strengthening the struggling people of God in their strife and task on earth, for they know full well that such visions are grounded on the perfected work of Christ (cf. 3: 21; 5: 6), and thus form part of the glorious eschatological reality of the One who came and is coming.

III

When we discuss the question whether the term "nation" (ethnos) conveys any eschatological meaning within the boundaries of God's universal Kingdom,² we come to the conclusion that this cannot be established with certainty.

(a) The whole object of Revelation is to reveal the sovereignty of God and His Christ in both Church and world by stressing one fact among others, namely that the universal people of God from all nations will be established even in the face of the direst opposition, and to inspire such a people to faithfulness by assuring them of God's all-powerful protection. Consequently if it be shown that Revelation gives no direct answer to the above-mentioned question, such a neglect should be readily understood.

(b) In Revelation, as elsewhere in Scripture, the word "nations" (*ethnē*) is used in its *religio-ethical* connotation and in the context of *salvation-history* rather than in its *ethnic* sense. This means: (i) that the expression "all the nations" must be read as contrasting with the one people of Israel of old; (ii) that in Revelation "nations" is often, as in the O.T. (e.g. Ps. 2: 1), used to denote the

² A question put by R. K. Orchard in *Out of every Nation*, I.M.C. Research Pamphlets No. 7 (1959), p. 50, and here discussed in terms of the Apocalypse.

whole of *sinful humanity* in its rebellion against the God of the Covenant (e.g. 2: 26-27; 11: 9, 18; 12: 5; 19: 15; 20: 8); (iii) that God's people from all nations do rise above all differences, including ethnical differences, without rendering such differences meaningless. (Note, e.g., that the gospel is proclaimed to every nation in the language it understands best, as can be readily concluded from 14: 6.)

(c) Even where a fourfold description is used which undoubtedly suggests an ethnical implication (5: 9; 7: 9; 11: 9; 13: 7; 14: 6), it is done with the object of stressing *universality*, as we see from Dan. 3: 4, 7, 29; 4: 1; 5: 19; 6: 26 and 7: 14; from Rev. 10: 11 and 17: 15, where one of the four "ethnical" terms is replaced by a more general term (kings and multitudes); and from the paraphrasing of such terms in non-ethnical terms (cf. 11: 10, where one finds the "ethnical" terms of 11: 9 being paraphrased: "those who dwell on the earth"). The book of Revelation makes abundantly clear that the universal Church triumphant consists of people from (*ek*) every tribe, tongue, people and nation. But the preposition *ek* leaves the question open whether at the end of time this people will still be regarded as made up of separate nations.

(d) When John in his vision of the new heaven and the new earth hears (21: 3) that the dwelling of God is with *men*, and that they shall be His people (*laoi*, Cod. Aleph and A), *laoi* may here simply have the original meaning of "multitudes" (as the term *hoi anthrōpoi*, "the people", probably suggests). In any case *laoi* here has a salvation-historical connotation as fulfilment of Lev. 26: 11-12 and Ezek. 37: 26-27 via the beautiful parallel in Zech. 2: 11 (M.T. and LXX v. 15), where many nations (*gōyîm, ethnē*) become one people (*'am, laos*).

(e) Even when Rev. 21: 24 and 26 mention kings and peoples who bring their "glory and honour" to the New Jerusalem, we cannot simply take this to include the ethnical survival of nations (although this in itself may be possible) because we have here a description of what is to be at the end of the age, given in terms of Isa. 60: 3-17, where the prophet describes (in terms of a custom of his own time) an imperial city to which the conquered nations paid tribute. This prophecy was partially fulfilled to Israel of old after the Babylonian captivity (cf. Ezr. 1: 1-4), and is today still being fulfilled by the bringing in of converts from all nations. The last-named can be seen, e.g., in the following striking fact: although Rev. 21: 1-22: 5 describes the final consummation, yet it also repeatedly refers back to, and includes, the period of

missionary activity in the interim between the first and second coming of the Lord (cf. 21: 6-7, 24-26; 22: 2).

(f) The last book of the Bible often expresses universality in *non-ethnic* terms, as for instance "those who dwell upon the earth": 3: 10; 6: 10; 8: 13; 11: 10; 13: 14; "the whole world" (*oikoumenē*): 3: 10; 12: 9; 16: 14; "mankind": 9: 4, 6, 10, 15, 18, 20; 11: 13; while, throughout the book, emphasis is also placed on the individual: at the end of every letter in chaps. 2-3; in the seven beatitudes (1: 3; 14: 13; 16: 15; 19: 9; 20: 6; 22: 7, 14), and also in 11: 18; 20: 13; 21: 6; 22: 17-19.

Thus the book of Revelation shows mankind restored by the bringing in of God's elect one by one, from all nations, by way of His covenant of grace, to become ultimately the one renewed people of God on a new earth where there will be unique diversity because everyone will receive a unique, new name from God (2: 17); at the same time, however, there will also be unique harmony *in* the diversity, because it will be the harmony of a theocentric Christocracy giving glory to God and to the Lamb, and following the Lamb wherever He may lead.

IV

The God of the Covenant uses His judgments to further the coming of His universal Kingdom.

Because Yahweh, the God of the Covenant, is the Creator and has through Christ reconciled the *world* to Himself, therefore all physical and cosmic catastrophes (in the air, on sea and on land—chapters 6; 8; 9; 16) must be seen as judgments of *grace*, as God's cosmic proclamation of judgment by means of which He punishes the enemies of His people, but also summons them to true repentance, as we see from the moving refrain that they did not repent of their deeds (9: 20, 21; 16: 9, 11).

This proclamation of judgment to urge the inhabitants of the earth to make their final decision, we hear in the following passages:

(a) "*Behold, He is coming with the clouds*" (1: 7). Although the emphasis is on the final coming, yet the position of these words among the opening sentences of the book, and the use of the present tense of the verb, indicate that v. 7 seeks to include all the intermediate "comings", so that everyone may see in time whom he has pierced, and repent.

(b) *Ruling the nations with an iron rod* (12: 5). In Ps. 2 this expression, in spite of the harshness of the verb *rā'a'*, is meant to bring nations to salvation *via* the king of Israel and, in its deepest sense, *via* the Messiah (Ps. 2: 8, 10-12). This, in addition to the

fact that in Rev. 12: 5 the expression is so closely associated with the *ascension* of the Messiah, shows that it must also include judgments of grace in the interim, before the iron rod is finally used to smite the nations as in Rev. 19: 15.

(c) *The hour of trial on the whole world* (3: 10). This great trial (*peirasmos*) most probably includes all trials since the last days of St. John, and in this way also the six trumpets of chapters 8 and 9. As far as chapter 9 is concerned, it clearly shows how God as sovereign Ruler of the universe is able to use even the powers of Satan himself as a punishment and a warning to the godless world, that it should repent (9: 4-6, 18-21).

(d) *God's judgments praised in the song of Moses and of the Lamb* (15: 3-4). In 15: 1-2 John beholds the great and victorious company of the redeemed from all nations, described in terms which transport the reader in memory to the scenes of the exodus of Israel from Egypt. With allusions to the song of Moses in both Ex. 15 (v. 11) and Deut. 32 (v. 4) John hears all the redeemed, singing a great song of praise in which they magnify God's incomparableness as King of the nations (or *ages*, as other strong MSS. read). Apparently hinting at the plagues of Egypt, the redeemed sing of the covenant God's intermediate chastisements of the nations before the End (cf. 15: 1 with chapter 16). And although there is among the nations a hardening of the hearts in proportion to the intensity of the plagues (16: 21); although these plagues already foreshadow the inevitable pronouncement of 22: 11; though the beatitude in 16: 15, as in the case of the other six in Revelation, refers in the first place to believers; although Revelation shows believers to be a predestined number known to God from all ages (13: 9; 20: 15), yet all this happens in harmony with the fact that finality in God's judgments is not reached until the Last Day of Judgment. In the dark night of divine judgments passed on a wicked world, the beatitude of 16: 15 is like a window being opened towards the world even at this late hour, so that everyone who so desires, still may come and take the water of life without price (22: 17). And when, with a clear allusion to Ps. 86: 8-9, John hears the victorious host of the redeemed sing:

All nations shall come and worship thee,

for thy judgments have been revealed (15: 4, RSV),

one may ask: is not this great company of the redeemed from all nations, standing at the celestial sea to sing this song of praise, itself proof of the truth of this great song of Moses and of the Lamb?

In the vision of the rider on the white horse (6: 2-3) and of the

angel with the eternal gospel (14: 6-7), God's cosmic judgments of the nations are interpreted for them in a *theocentric-christological* manner, because here, *within the framework of His judgments of grace in this intermediate dispensation, the full gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in such a way that the nations have no ground whatsoever for exemption from blame.*

(a) *The Rider on the white horse* (6: 2-3). The fact that white is always used in Revelation to symbolize heavenly glory (2: 17; 3: 5; 7: 9, etc.); the special way in which His conquering advance is described; the parallel which this forms with the direct portrayal of Christ in 19: 11-16; the fact that Ps. 45: 3-5 can serve as an O.T. parallel; all this and a great deal more brings the *Christ* to mind. The fact that the Rider in 19: 13 is called the "Logos"; that an arrow can symbolize words (Ps. 64: 3; Isa. 49: 2); that Mk. 13 and Matt. 24 give the gospel so prominent a place between signs of imminent judgment corresponding to those in Rev. 6—all these things bring the *Word* of Christ to mind. The horse as symbol of war (Job 39: 22-28; Ps. 20: 8; Rev. 9: 7; 14: 20; 18: 13, etc.); the bow as symbol of judgment (Ps. 45: 5); this and much more shows this Rider as One who comes to *execute judgment.*

Thus: while the second horseman signifies war, the third want and hunger, the fourth death as the result of many judgments (including those symbolized by the second and third horsemen), the first horseman stands for Christ who, with His word, sweeps irresistibly across the world in a mighty wave of judgment. In executing this very judgment He makes the other horsemen serve His purposes too, without ever becoming identified with them, because He is KURIOS CHRISTOS—the one who was considered worthy to take the scroll of God's decrees from God's own hand and break the seals, so that, through the ages, He advances from judgments of grace to judgments of grace up to the final Judgment Day.

(b) *The "eternal gospel"* (14: 6-7). Here we hear: (i) the age-old gospel of the Kingdom with its message of grace and judgment, (ii) a gospel embedded in a special judgment-context before the final execution of judgment. The truth of the statement in (i) is proved by considerations such as these: the technical meaning of "gospel" (*euangelion*) in Scripture as the glad tidings concerning Christ; the adjective *aiōnion*; the terms implying complete universality by which the hearers are described; the fact that we see from the context that, in spite of all, there is still an opportunity for repentance (vv. 9-13); and Paul's missionary preaching in Acts

14: 15-17 as a parallel. The special *judgment*-context is seen from v. 7 ("the hour . . . has come"), from v. 8 (fall of Babylon), and the connection of the last mentioned with 8: 13.

As Revelation is a book so full of symbolical utterances, we cannot be sure whether this is the actual proclamation of a message by an angel as in Lk. 2: 10. (Cf. Rev. 8: 13 where, according to the best reading, an eagle brings the message.) It may be that this vision of an angel bringing a message takes together, as in one great focus, all the labour and exertion of people who down through the ages brought the good tidings to every nation.

V

In the coming of His Kingdom the God of the Covenant uses His own people in the judgments of grace passed on the nations.

1. This is first of all seen from the name "servants" (*douloi*), which is used not only of John and the prophets (1: 1; 11: 18) but also of all God's elect (*inter alia* 7: 3; 22: 3, 9), thus linking up with O.T. usage (cf. 1 Kings 8: 23; 2 Kings 9: 7; Isa. 65: 13-15, etc.). This name *doulos*, denoting total submission to the God of the Covenant (and therefore exclusion of any other gods), implies election to perform a task for God. For the *doulos* it is the highest honour to perform this task in spite of ensuing suffering or even death.

2. The *douleia* of the Church finds expression in a testimony (*marturia*) for Jesus Christ in the world, a testimony which in its context (like the Greek word in the original) bears a strong forensic character: the witness for Jesus Christ is God's witness in his lawsuit against the nations. To God's glory he witnesses *for* God *against* unbelief, always exhorting to conversion before the final Day of Judgment.

(a) *John as witness.* Jesus, while on earth, testified to Himself—His testimony really being God's own testimony concerning His Son. It was because John faithfully passed on this testimony of Jesus to the churches that he was banished to Patmos (1: 9). There he, the servant of Christ, was commissioned to be a witness to the churches (1: 1-2) in order to strengthen them in their task of being God's witnesses to the world (Rev. 2-3). In this task God now makes him a real "son of thunder", who, by means of this very book of Revelation, sounds in a mighty way the alarm in Christ's cause. (Cf. 10: 11: "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings".)

(b) *All believers as witnesses.* The combined testimonies of passages such as 12: 11, 17; 17: 6; and 20: 4, show that all

believers are witnesses for Jesus in His lawsuit against the world.

(c) *The two witnesses of Rev. 11.* Because of (b) and other considerations, as for instance that the two witnesses are called lampstands, it is probable that the two witnesses stand for the Church as a whole (office-bearers and members), which during this intervening period of 1,260 days bears witness among all nations (v. 9) as God's Spirit-filled, witnessing Church (cf. olive trees and lampstands, v. 4). The two witnesses are used by God in His judgments of grace on the nations. This is evident, firstly, by their being clothed in sackcloth (as those who exhort men to penitence), secondly, because of their number (cf. the legal principle for a court-case in Deut. 19: 15), and thirdly, because of the effective force of their fiery words (v. 5, reminding us of Elijah). And although the result is suffering, even unto death (vv. 2, 7-10), the Church Militant is essentially inviolable, an unconquerable temple of God in the midst of an anti-christian world (v. 1).

(d) *Philadelphia as witness* (3: 7-13). Philadelphia wearied not of waiting on God in spite of troubles and afflictions. She not only preached the word of Christ's patient endurance (*hupomonē*) but also reflected it in her life. And so this church found an open door among the most hardened Jews. Philadelphia was included as an instrument in God's judgments of grace on the nations, particularly the Jews, because later some of the Jews from the very synagogue of Satan appeared as witnesses for the King of the Church (v. 9)! By this very fact Philadelphia proves that in difficult circumstances perseverance in waiting for the coming of Him who has come is not a passive waiting, but unconquerable missionary zeal indeed.

3. When God's people joyously proclaim that they are made a "kingdom, priests" (*basileia, hierēis*) for the God and Father of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1: 6; cf. 5: 9-10), this serves to unfold the *douleia* (service)—and in the *douleia* the *marturia* (testimony) of the Church—in its manifold forms in the world.

Although the expression "for His God and Father" makes the Church more than just church-for-the-world, yet the being-a-church-for-the-world is an integral part of its existence, because God the Father revealed Himself, in Christ, as God-for-the-world (John 3: 16). Thus, in so far as the Church really lives for God, it will truly be a Church *for* the world, without ever being a Church *of* the world.

"Kingdom, priests" means also that God's people, embodied in the Church Militant, already advance as conquering kings through the priestly sacrifice, i.e. through the faithful recognition of God's

royal sovereignty over their lives. Partly in the light of Ex. 19: 6 the concept "kingdom" in close conjunction with "priests" means being ruled *by* God in Christ, and therefore also ruling *with* Him in the world: here on earth albeit with a cross in the heart, but in the hereafter with a crown on the head.

Bearing in mind this association between kingdom and priests and the all-embracing task of an O.T. priest, the task of God's people as witnesses now evolves as the witness seen in the priestly offering of oneself to God in Christ. This, in turn, expresses itself in verbal testimony on His behalf; in suffering for His sake; in supplication, and intercession, in thanksgiving and praise to Him.

(a) *Witnessing by means of a life wholly dedicated to God.* The person of the priest was intimately associated with sacrifice (cf. Lev. 1-4; 1 Sam. 2: 28; Heb. 8: 3). Now when God's New Testament people are called priests, one is reminded of the fact that their own lives, on the ground of Christ's perfect sacrifice of Himself (Psa. 40: 6-8; Heb. 10: 5-10), have now become one holy offering of thankful obedience to the God of the Covenant. When the seven churches are being symbolized by seven golden lampstands (1: 12, 20), one is reminded of the golden lampstand of Ex. 27: 20-21. Its lamps, made of beaten gold, had to burn throughout the night, and were filled with pure oil of crushed olives. Here, indeed, is a striking symbol of God's people as a pure offering to the Lord. Through this offering they become a light in the world, a witness to Him who abides in the midst of His people and who, because He is the *Lamb*, is also the *Lamp* (Rev. 21: 23). The Church as a light is closely associated with God's judgment of grace in the world: by means of the light, darkness is recognized and judged as darkness, and those who dwell in darkness are warned urgently and betimes.

Furthermore, the King of the Church is ever ready, by virtue of His covenant of grace, to enter into judgment with His own people when their life's witness towards the world grows dim (Rev. 2-3). Thus in the witness of the Church of Ephesus, after she had lost her *bride's* love for Christ, there was a hardening which dimmed the brightness of what once had been the perfect offering of love to the Bridegroom. The offering of Pergamum was dimmed because there, to evade persecution, people probably conformed to the dictates of an anti-christian state. In Thyatira with its many trade guilds, the church was in danger of conforming to certain practices in *society* in order to avoid economic and social sanctions. The offering of Sardis consisted mainly of empty works, making the Church seem alive when it was really dead.

In Laodicea the offering was brought *half-heartedly*. These churches are all admonished to return to God, so that they bring a pure sacrifice producing a bright light. Or else . . . the warning of 2: 5 begins to operate! Thus the Church should constantly bring the sacrifice of itself within the eschatological framework of God's reiterated and urgent proclamation: "Behold, I am coming soon" (22: 7; cf. 2: 16; 3: 11; 22: 12, 20).

(b) *Witnessing by the offering of verbal testimony*. One of the most important tasks of a priest of Israel was to instruct the people in the written Word (the Torah), Neh. 1: 9; Mal. 2: 5-7, etc. Through the only High Priest, Jesus Christ, God's new Israel has now become a kingly priesthood *in and for* the world (1 Pet. 2: 9), giving instruction, as was foreshadowed by the prophets in passages such as Isa. 2: 1-5; 66: 18-22.

(c) *Witnessing through the offering of suffering*. The Church must witness in a sinful and essentially antagonistic world; thus witnessing is associated with the taking up of a cross, and suffering becomes part of witnessing. Such suffering is both inward (the daily crucifying of self) and outward, as for instance where there is mockery and persecution (1: 9; 2: 8-11) and a martyr's death (2: 13). Although being a witness does not necessarily mean that every believer dies a martyr's death (cf. 1: 9), yet it means that a witness must be prepared to seal his testimony by the shedding of his blood, as is seen from the oft-mentioned martyrdom of witnesses for Jesus in Revelation (2: 13; 6: 9; 12: 11; 17: 6; 20: 4).

(d) *Witnessing through the offering of prayer (supplication and intercession)*. The prayers (*proseuchai*) of 5: 8 call to mind the supplication and intercession of believers (cf. Psa. 141: 1, 2 [LXX Psa. 140] and Rom. 15: 30, where the same word is used). In Rev. 8 such prayers are seen as one of the most potent instruments in God's judgments of grace on nations: in answer to the prayers of His people, sent up to Him in anguish, the trumpets of judgment, one after the other, are sounded the world over as a call to repentance (9: 20-21). Something similar is found in 11: 6, where the action of the two witnesses (pictured in 11: 1 as a vast multitude worshipping in the temple) is similar to that of Elijah who also could, through prayer, close or open the heavens (1 Kings 17; 18; Jas. 5: 17, 18) in a mighty witness against all unbelief. As regards Rev. 22: 17, we see that the more urgently the Church petitions the Bridegroom to come (moved by the Spirit and in answer to the assurance of the Bridegroom that He will in truth come soon) the more urgent—*via* this prayer—is the appeal made

to the world to take the water of life, without price.

(e) *Witnessing through the offering of prayer (thanksgiving and praise)*. The book which is so full of the witnessing of God's people in the world through suffering, is also full of thanksgiving and praise (4: 11; 5: 8-14; 11: 16-19; 15: 3-4; 19: 4-8). God's people extol their kingly priesthood in joyous songs of praise (1: 5-6; 5: 9-10), thus showing that praise and thanksgiving are a characteristic of God's people, an essential element of a *marturia* which is prepared to include even a martyr's death. As true thanksgiving and praise are really the means of giving *God* the highest honour, therefore the Church is unconquerable in the world in so far as hymns of praise are part of its testimony. Such praise is possible and becomes a reality because it was for this very purpose that the KURIOS KURIŌN gave His churches this all-conquering word in conclusion: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all (the saints)."

VI

Finally this whole investigation serves to show how much Revelation stresses both the work of God and that of the Church in the coming of the Kingdom—the *missio Dei* as well as the *missio ecclesiae*—not as *competitive* but as *corresponding* powers, with the mission of the Church rooted in that of God.

Thus the God of the Covenant causes His Kingdom to come filled with a people from all nations who, together with a countless host of angels in a renewed creation, will sing their songs of praise unto all eternity to Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.

Decoligny Theological School, Umtata, Transkei.