

Worthy Lamb

An Exegetical-Spiritual Commentary on John's Apocalypse

Andreas Hoeck



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Preface

Jesus is the first and the last name mentioned in the Book of the Apocalypse, solemnly pronounced no fewer than four times in its two opening (1:1–2) and closing verses (22:20–21). And just as he is, therefore, the beginning and the end of his Revelation to John, so he is also the all-embracing Alpha and Omega of God’s historical dealings with the human family (22:13), making both ipso facto Christocentric. Unquestionably the most challenging book of the New Testament, its narration is of irresistible fascination to reader and interpreter alike. As the saying goes, truth is stranger than fiction; so also the Apocalypse as a veritable kaleidoscope of preternatural visions, brimming with intriguing and often breathtaking images more thrilling than any fable or fantasy, unveiled to John to faithfully report to us. We can intuit how much is at stake, and rather than being ill at ease with it, we are invited to approach it with thoughtfulness, creativity, and imagination. Such pondering is far removed from any literalist or unspiritual reading of the tea leaves or crystal-gazing, but rather seeks to grasp its divine message involving time and eternity.

When considered in this way, the Book of Revelation can never be passé; on the contrary, its attractiveness will continue to grow. Given the radical paucity of eschatological thought in the ancient world, it marks the defining highpoint of the biblical theology of history. Indeed, it superbly unfurls what was presaged about the panhistorical struggle on earth between happiness and rebellion especially in Psalms 1–2, or between the Church and the infernal gates as foretold at Matthew 16:18. And by keeping an unwavering

focus on the apocalyptic Lamb, we will witness the victory of righteousness in the end.

This book is born out of three decades of personal studies of John's Apocalypse, including my doctoral dissertation on the topic of the New Jerusalem at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome back in 2001, preceded and followed by many uninterrupted years of research and seminary teaching. But what triggered the thought of writing this commentary were those reiterated inquiries of my students over the years: "What do all these apocalyptic symbols mean for our lives today?" So, the intention was to point to the vast horizon of connections between a close reading of the text of Revelation and Christian spirituality, with no claim whatsoever to exhaustiveness.

Some initial vistas and patterns of interpretation are offered here, in hopes that they may incentivize the reader to carry on and go deeper in his own right, ideally with a Bible at hand to look up at least some of the numerous scriptural cross-references. *In puero homo*, "in the infant is hidden the adult," goes the adage attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, putting in a nutshell the truism that seminal realities mature and reach a fuller potential as our lives go on. May this exegetical-spiritual exposition of the Apocalypse in some small ways illumine the reader's thinking, to recognize ever more readily the paradigm of that epic conflict between the forces of light and darkness, between the dragon and the Lamb, playing out not only in the vicissitudes of the world today, but also in one's personal life.

But you, dear reader, may be wondering why there is yet another commentary on top of hundreds written over the centuries already, starting from the earliest surviving complete Latin commentary by the late third-century ecclesiastical writer Victorinus of Pettau, and the oldest Greek patristic one by the seventh-century Andrew of Caesarea, up to the almost uncountable, interdenominational, and highly respected ones of our own time. To answer this very justified question, allow me to point to three methodical traits whose combination, I believe, lends to the one you are holding in your hands a touch of uniqueness.

Casting about for perhaps novel ways to benefit from Revelation as an inexhaustible repository of insights for our Christian spirituality, I *firstly* decided to write from a Catholic vantage point. And what is meant by that is that the conclusions drawn from the interpretation of its symbolism invariably flow into reflections of a spiritual nature that will boil down to tenets of Catholic faith and morals. As a *second* methodological determination, this present commentary aims at enriching the interior life of the baptized soul. Hence, it will not be a matter of entertaining contemporary or futuristic geopolitical speculations,

but rather of receiving a salvific message for the Christian heart through a close present-centered reading, attempting to actualize its timeless truths.¹ Tied into this is the *third* hermeneutical criterion underlying this book, and that is its preference for an idealist point of view that does not attempt to identify apocalyptic imagery with concrete historical events. Rather, symbols, figures, and metaphors are viewed as paradigmatic of the epic battle between good and evil that await their careful application to the interior life of the disciples of Christ of all times and places. Yet that mindset does not exclude an occasional reference to a more historicist reading of John's text.

And by choosing this allegorical-spiritual line of thought, we insert ourselves into a tradition that has the influential fourth-century Latin theologian Tyconius as one of its earliest proponents. But what is perhaps most singular about this present commentary² is that I have preferentially drawn, among others, on two far less known representatives of the idealist school, making them Archimedean points of comparison, namely, Rupert of Deutz and Adrienne von Speyr. The former, classically known as Rupertus Tuitiensis (d. 1129), was the Abbot of St. Heribert's Monastery in Cologne, present-day Germany. He became widely known as an influential Benedictine theologian during a period dominated by the Cluniac Reforms in Europe, a diligent and passionate figure of pre-scholastic medieval exegesis.³ His hitherto untranslated Latin commentary on the Book of Revelation that I consulted (*In Apocalypsim Joannis Apostoli commentaria*) is heavily indebted to the interpretation of three foregoing Benedictines, namely, St. Bede the Venerable, Ambrose Autpert, and Haimo of Auxerre.⁴ In this book he will be referred to simply as Rupert and quoted under the acronym RD. The Servant of God Adrienne von Speyr (d. 1967) in turn was a Swiss Catholic physician, prolific writer, and theologian. She creatively collaborated with the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar and is considered to have been a mystic and stigmatist, whose profound convictions of faith were brought to maturity amid the calamities of the Second World War. I draw on her spiritual reflections on the Book of Revelation from the original German commentary (*Apokalypse: Betrachtungen über die Geheime Offenbarung*), referring to her simply as Adrienne, henceforth cited under her initials AvS.

1. Cf. Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 2–8.

2. Distinguishing it from similar ones, e.g., Stephen C. Doyle, *Apocalypse: A Catholic Perspective on the Book of Revelation* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger, 2005).

3. Cf. Benedict XVI's General Audience on Rupert of Deutz (December 9, 2009).

4. Cf. Ian Boxall and Richard M. Tresley, *The Book of Revelation and Its Interpreters: Short Studies and an Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 227.

All that said, an explanatory word concerning the book's purpose, intended readership, and recommended usage is in order. Beginning with its purpose, the subtitle speaks of an exegetical-spiritual commentary, which means that the entire Apocalypse, chapter and verse, will be interpreted by paying close attention to the text's linguistic and literary traits. This scrutiny of its grammatical, syntactical, and vocabular features will then inform inferences and speculations of a theological nature, highlighting its biblical meaning proper. But the goal is to take those scriptural expositions or findings and apply them to the realm of Christian spirituality. Thus, we are aiming not only at deciphering apocalyptic imagery, but at understanding its significance and relevance for one's personal life as a baptized member of God's people. And this no doubt must be considered to have been the intention of the sacred author, to not only communicate sterile symbolisms but to inspire his readers to reform their lives and pursue virtue and holiness.

And that brings me to the intended readership: As alluded to in the second paragraph above, the book was conceived as a written response, as it were, to conversations with seminary students over the years. I had them in mind primarily when I decided to illustrate the connection between apocalyptic metaphor and their future priestly life. Consequently, it presupposes at least some prior familiarity with biblical matters, and with the Book of Revelation and its interpreters in particular. But such an ideal background should not stop any other reader from delving in. As a matter of fact, I do believe that it holds an appeal for a wider audience of college students, Catholic Christians, and all Christians alike, and that it could even serve as a textbook for a course or seminar on John's Apocalypse. But ultimately, anybody of goodwill and interest in the Sacred Scriptures, regardless of background, should feel invited to engage in reading this exegetical-spiritual commentary. Allow me to channel that childlike sing-song voice that impelled St. Augustine to open the Bible and be enriched by its wisdom: *Tolle lege, tolle lege!* (Latin for "Take up and read, take up and read!")⁵

At this point, may I also add a few practical recommendations on how to make good use of the pages of this book: In order that the forest not be missed for the trees, it will be of great benefit to keep a close eye on the detailed outline of the Book of Revelation found in the Appendix, which will serve as an exoskeleton, as it were, ensuring structural logic and a clearer train of thought. Its headings and subheadings offer guidance through the multiplicity of Revelation's image-fields. They caption major thematic threads such as the septets of

5. Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.12.

letters, seals, trumpets, plague-bowls, and makarisms, but also the quartets of dirges, Hallelujahs, and wisdom calls, as well as the various stages of the Church as *expectans* (“awaiting”), *militans* (“militant”), *pressa* (“persecuted”), *triumphans* (“triumphant”), *sponsalis* (“espoused”), and *consummata* (“fulfilled”). Also, at the beginning of several chapters, a narrative summary is included to make sure the larger apocalyptic plot is not overlooked. I have opted against headlining the spiritual reflections, since they are interwoven into each passage of exegetical and theological exposition. Hence, they form a textual unity requiring the reader to proceed patiently and meditatively, also mindful of the many included biblical cross-references to verify intertextual meaning.

In terms of the book’s methodology, we choose to forego a more comprehensive isagogics to the literary and exegetical science behind the Book of Revelation, including its place within the broader category of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic thought and its function during first-century Christianity, which, I believe, would be redundant considering that these have already been expansively dealt with in numerous other modern commentaries. Suffice it to reference the superb introductions, inclusive of extensive bibliographies, contained in Beale (*Book of Revelation*), Harrington (*Revelation*), Williamson (*Revelation*), as well as Muller (*History of the Book of Revelation*).⁶

Nevertheless, here is a preliminary review of a few general principles that undergird the organization and method of exegesis of this present book. Beginning with its format, instead of selecting and isolating certain passages for interpretation,⁷ an attempt has been made to comment on every single verse of Revelation. All theological or spiritual inferences will be based on a meticulous analysis of the vocabular-literal meaning of words and sentences, in consultation with dictionaries such as Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, or digitized resources such as Accordance Bible Software and BibleHub.

Although rooted in the soil of intertestamental Judeo-Christian apocalypses, John’s Apocalypse stands out by its uncompromising Christocentrism as well as its markedly solecistic style. Teeming as it does with non-Greek phraseology and downright grammatical irregularities, its language betrays a

6. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013 [reprint]); Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, SaPaSe (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993); Peter S. Williamson, *Revelation*, CCSS (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015); David G. Muller, *Testing the Apocalypse: The History of the Book of Revelation* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow [Nelson & Zondervan], 2016).

7. E.g., A. Robert Nusca, *The Christ of the Apocalypse: Contemplating the Faces of Jesus in the Book of Revelation* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2018).

strong Semitic influence.⁸ One can only imagine how its linguistic harshness must have provoked strong reactions from an early Hellenic-Christian audience, and by the same token it makes the book even more thought-provoking, analogous to its theological and spiritual provocativeness. As he struggles to put his otherworldly visions into human words, the apostle's speech becomes meta-conceptual and trans-historical, so to speak, inserting himself into the stream of mystics as the "calligraphers of the ineffable."⁹

Since in the Catholic Church the 1986 New Vulgate¹⁰ (*editio typica altera* or revised version) is the official Latin text, it will be our exegetical fulcrum, while we translate and analyze the Koine Greek version and an English rendition, that is, the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, accordingly. Much more than any other New Testament book, John's Revelation is a masterpiece of intertextuality, a veritable tapestry of approximately one thousand innuendos to the Old Testament.¹¹ His thought-world is shaped by the book of Exodus, by the prophecies of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, as well as by the Wisdom books. Also, the epistolary format and the Asian provenance of Revelation suggest a profound Pauline affinity.¹² With amazing originality, he frequently gives these influences a paradoxical twist, always delighting in vivid and dramatic imagery. And it is not an exaggeration to say that the Old Testament is sufficient to unlock every single apocalyptic simile. It is for this reason that plentiful biblical cross-references were added in this book, to stimulate the reader's imagination, to facilitate further reflection, and to aid in tying the scriptural-spiritual threads together.

Moreover, what has been upheld for nearly two thousand years of Catholic tradition is that the visionary who authored the Apocalypse and who restates his personal name "John" four times in it, is identical with John the Evangelist, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the beloved disciple and apostle of Christ Jesus.¹³ And that is also the premise endorsed in this commentary,

8. Cf. Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906); Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

9. Cf. William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xiv.

10. In this book also called Nova Vulgata and Neo-Vulgate.

11. Cf. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 210; G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1082.

12. Cf. Garrick V. Allen, *The Book of Revelation and Early Jewish Textual Culture*, SNTSMS 168 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

13. For instance, the Divine Office's Latin hymn of the Morning Prayer on the feast day of St. John (December 27) appears to confirm that Johannine authorship: "Tu, raptus in sublimia,

enabling us to study his Revelation in theological closeness to his Gospel and Letters.¹⁴ Not only does he lend his apostolic authority to the Lord's dictate, but his love for him and his Boanerges zeal for his Kingdom, too, and his acute discernment of spirits (Mark 9:38), make him an inspiring exemplar of how to receive his writing.

Another methodic postulation is the centrality of the heavenly liturgy, meaning that the cosmic worship that unfolds unceasingly before the Lamb's throne is all-encompassing and all-important both for the ecclesial community as well as for the individual Christian. It is the native setting for the proclamation, the hearing, and the understanding of God's Revelation, also granting us a glimpse into the Ephesian church shepherded by John.¹⁵ Hence, it is not at all unexpected that the overarching spiritual conflict hinges on the true adoration of the Most High and his Anointed One, in opposition to the blasphemous worship of the dragon and his beastly minions.

Furthermore, in its well-structured outline, the apocalyptic plot advances not so much in chronological linearity of ever-new scenes, but mainly in a logic of circularity or spiraling recapitulation, presenting the same epic conflict between the dragon and the Lamb from ever-varying angles.¹⁶ And so, we will follow its canonical sequence of chapters and visions, highlighting the various tercets, quartets, and septets, seeking to unpack each one as a vignette representing a different stage in the Christian's interior life. What is more, the Apocalypse cannot be deciphered except by a hermeneutics of "signification" (*sēmainō*, σημαίνω, *significare*, Rev 1:1) or symbolism.¹⁷ John's metaphorical world incorporates anthropological (humanity-related), arithmetic¹⁸

/ arcana caeli conspicis; / Agni sed et mysteria / Ecclesiaeque percipis" (author's translation: "Raptured into sublimity, you saw the secrets of heaven, but also received the mysteries of the Lamb and of the Church").

14. Cf. Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), ix.

15. Cf. Patrick Henry Reardon, *Revelation: A Liturgical Prophecy* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 9–33.

16. Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 20.17; Williamson, *Revelation*, 24.

17. A symbol being "something chosen to stand for or represent something else, usually because of a resemblance in qualities or characteristics." A. H. Marckwardt et al., *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, International Edition, vol. 2 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967), 1270.

18. Where, for instance, "one" can stand for divine excellence or unity, "three" for the Trinity, "three and a half" for a limited time, "four" for creation or universality, "six" for imperfection, "seven" for fullness or salvation, "eight" for regeneration, "nine" for mystery, "ten" for restricted world-power, "twelve" and "twenty-four" for God's people, "forty" for the Church's

(number-related), chromatic (color-related), cosmic (cataclysm-related), and theriomorphic (animal-related) symbols. Oftentimes, he employs them in a cumulative fashion, blending elements that would be incompatible on earth, to underscore divine transcendence.

Moreover, Revelation represents a worldview of relative ethical dualism where evil makes war against the principles of good while God remains in control at all times and into eternity. It seems to place an exclamation mark behind Malachi's prediction, "Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him" (Mal 3:18). However, unlike an absolute dualism of manichaistic fashion, where this conflict would perpetuate itself *ad infinitum*, the apocalyptic dualism witnesses how history repeats itself in that struggle, but that after the eschatological turning point of Christ's Resurrection, everything becomes an anticipation of his eventual victory at the end of history.

Before we absorb ourselves in the sacred text, however, I must express my gratitude to those who helped make this book possible. First and foremost, I am filled with thankfulness toward my late father and my mother who were the ones who first placed a Bible into my hands as a child; this book is dedicated to them, *parentibus pietate*. I am also indebted to the late Fr. Ugo Vanni, SJ, my esteemed former professor of John's Apocalypse and doctoral director at my beloved alma mater, the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, back in the 1990s. His love for Revelation and his wisdom in teaching it kindled a fire in me to take up this magnificent book of Scripture and scrutinize it myself, and that flame has only increased over the years; may the good Lord richly reward him for his mentorship. Another debt of gratitude is owed to Fr. Daniel Leonard, the current rector of Saint John Vianney Theological Seminary of the Archdiocese of Denver, who granted me a sabbatical leave for the fall of the academic year 2022: that gift turned out to be just perfect timing to advance the writing of this book, begun in early 2020. A heartfelt thanks goes also to our academic dean, Dr. Alphonso Pinto, for his support, to the Theology faculty who graciously covered my coursework during my absence from the classroom, and to the kind staff of our seminary library, especially Stephen Sweeney and Tamara Conley. I am very appreciative, too, of the magnanimity, expertise, and outstanding knowledgeableness of the reviewers as the manuscript underwent a double-blind peer review. A sincere thank you also to Erika Zabinski, the copy-editor, who made it so easy and pleasant to work through the final corrections

trials, and "one thousand" for an extended but not endless period; cf. Jean-Pierre Prévost, *How to Read the Apocalypse*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 33.

and ready the manuscript for printing. I thank Kathryn Wehr, who carefully proofread the manuscript, even checking the Greek diacritics. I am also much obliged to Deacon Larry Boldt, pastoral associate of St. Peter Catholic Church in St. Charles, Missouri, for going out of his way to provide me with the lovely photography of the Apocalyptic Lamb stained glass window featured on the book's front cover. Likewise, I am grateful for the professional and patient work of the *ensor librorum*, Fr. Evan Koop, instrumental in granting the *Imprimatur* from the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. Last but not least, my deep gratitude goes to Fr. Kevin Zilverberg for having so generously accepted this book for publication in his Catholic Theological Formation Series; and the fact that he is an alum of our seminary and my former student adds much joy to my thankfulness, but words fail to describe his Godsent kindness and helpfulness in carrying this project across the finish line.

And I cannot close these opening remarks without mentioning St. Joseph. As a minuscule token of filial devotion, I would like to entrust this book and its readers to him as the patron saint of the universal Church, who like John was instructed by God about Jesus through an angel in dreams (Matt 1:20). In due season, that Son of the carpenter, while speaking to all only in parables, would explain everything in private to his disciples (Mark 4:34); and so, may he now be at our side and in our mind to help unseal the mysteries of his Apocalypse to us.

FR. ANDREAS HOECK
November 1, 2023
Solemnity of All Saints