

Behind the Veil

It is probably quite foolish to claim some special wisdom about the book of the Revelation.¹ For almost 2000 years the minds of many Christians, and indeed the minds of some non-Christians, have been occupied with that relatively small document.² For some it holds the sinister key to the future, for others it is the cryptic explanation of God's purposes in history, while for, perhaps, most readers the book is just a mass of confusing symbolism.

Some years ago, I prepared a small commentary on Revelation. It was initially intended for a group that I was leading and was written for people who were among those who were confused by Revelation. I knew that if it was ever to be published it would require a lot of revising and polishing and so I started the process but, within a couple of weeks, Geoff Bingham's *The Revelation of St John the Divine*³ was published. That work, and especially the essays in it, made my effort seem a bit pointless so the task was shelved.

My thinking about the book of Revelation has not stopped, however, and over the last few years I have begun to wonder about some of things I previously wrote and taught. It was not that those things were wrong so much as that they were too 'introductory' and perhaps not looking at the issues with sufficient perception. That certainly did not mean that I again wanted to produce a commentary. There are many around and a lot of them have been produced in the last few years and they are very good. Of course, many of those commentaries are *very* large and full of so much detail that the average Bible reader would not even consider referring to them.⁴

Yet I do want to offer some suggestions. I want to do so by asking if John, the writer of Revelation, may not have had a simple yet quite profound view of reality which determined at least some of his use of symbolism. And I want to suggest that, since John wrote to churches and not to scholars, his work might really have something simple to say to ordinary Bible readers (or, in the case of the original recipients, ordinary Bible hearers; see Rev. 1:3). Let me begin, then, by explaining how I came to begin this line of questioning.

In Revelation 21:1-3, John wrote:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud

¹ The book of the Revelation is also, and increasingly, referred to as the *Apocalypse*, and abbreviated as *Apoc*. The word 'apocalypse' is only the Greek word for 'revelation'.

² Revelation is the sixth largest of the books of the New Testament after the Gospels and Acts, with only about 11,800 words.

³ NCPI, Blackwood, 1993.

⁴ David Aune's three volume work in the Word Biblical Commentary series runs to 1354 pages plus 302 pages of introduction and Greg Beale's in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series 1245 words plus introduction.

voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them...'

Aside from the humorous error in judgment by the translators of the NRSV where, in their eagerness to avoid gender specific language, they have translated 'men' by 'mortals', in a context where 'Death and Hades' are no longer an issue (see Rev. 20:14; 21:4), there is the puzzling observation that 'the sea was no more'. The word 'sea' occurs on the following occasions in Revelation:

Rev. 4:6 and in front of the throne there is something like a **sea** of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:

Rev. 5:13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the **sea**, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

Rev. 7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or **sea** or against any tree.

Rev. 7:2 I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and **sea**,

Rev. 7:3 saying, "Do not damage the earth or the **sea** or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads."

Rev. 8:8 The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the **sea**.

Rev. 8:9 A third of the **sea** became blood, a third of the living creatures in the **sea** died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

Rev. 10:2 He held a little scroll open in his hand. Setting his right foot on the **sea** and his left foot on the land,

Rev. 10:5 Then the angel whom I saw standing on the **sea** and the land raised his right hand to heaven

Rev. 10:6 and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the **sea** and what is in it: "There will be no more delay,

Rev. 10:8 Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the **sea** and on the land."

Rev. 12:12 Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the **sea**, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

Rev. 13:1 (12:18) Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. (13:1) And I saw a beast rising out of the **sea** having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.

Rev. 14:7 He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the **sea** and the springs of water."

Rev. 15:2 And I saw what appeared to be a **sea** of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the **sea** of glass with harps of God in their hands.

Rev. 16:3 The second angel poured his bowl into the **sea**, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the **sea** died.

Rev. 18:17 For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!" And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the **sea**, stood far off

Rev. 18:19 And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, "Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at **sea** grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste.

Rev. 18:21 Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the **sea**, saying, "With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more;

Rev. 20:8 and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the **sea**.

Rev. 20:13 And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done.

Rev. 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

Some of those occasions plainly refer to the sea as ‘ocean’, as in 18:17 and 19, while others, in a related way, refer to a part of the whole of creation, as in 5:13 and 14:17. Writing on 4:6, Paul Barnett summarises the uses of ‘sea’ in Revelation by saying:

Before the throne was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal (John does not actually say what it was, only what it looked like). Elsewhere in the Revelation the sea, (Greek: *thalassa*) is the abode of evil (see 13:1) and the lake (Greek: *limnē*⁵) is the place of punishment of the enemies of God (see 19:20; 20:10,14,15). But the sea also reminds us of the Red Sea through which God delivered his people. Later John will describe faithful believers as having emerged triumphant from ‘what looked like sea of glass mixed with fire’ (15:2) singing the Song of Moses (15:3). The twenty four elders, symbolizing the triumphant people of God, have now emerged from the fiery sea of affliction and persecution into the presence of their God. This beautiful, peaceful, sea-like expanse before the throne is meant to portray the stillness and majesty of the final victory of God. The fire in the sea is no more; all conflict is now passed. There are few things so quietly beautiful as the glass-like sea untroubled by wind as seen in the first light after the dawn.⁶

On the other hand, Geoff. Bingham wrote:

Verse 6a and before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. This sea, which in the temple was the great bronze laver in which the priest washed before approaching the Holy Place, could quite represent peace to the sinner, and a quiet and serene conscience, or it could represent the purifying of the waters of baptism – Paul’s ‘laver of regeneration’ (Titus 3:5) bringing ‘renewal in the Holy Spirit’.⁷

So, while we might refer to commentaries great and small, and I am more than happy to recommend both Barnett’s and Bingham’s books as extremely helpful, there still remain times when our questions are unanswered. What *does* John imply when he says ‘the sea was no more’? If it is a reference to the ocean, we might still ask why that aspect of God’s creation should not be present in ‘the new heavens and the new earth’. On the other hand, what might the absence of the laver in the Old Testament temple signify? However, on 21:1, Geoff. Bingham comments:

and the sea was no more:- i.e. the sea as a created thing had always been a problem (as well as useful) to man. If ‘sea’ here means that out of which the first beast emerged (13:1), then we understand it as in Isaiah 57:20, ‘the wicked are like the restless sea ... that casts up mire and dirt’. This is best destroyed for ever.⁸

At best we might have only established that the word ‘sea’ is used with different implications; at worst we might have re-enforced our earlier sense of confusion.

Is there another way forward? Why should we, as uncomplicated Bible readers today, need to surrender so easily, when John’s first audience(s) were obviously expected to gain significant blessing and encouragement in difficult times from this work. At least we do know a little about those first audiences. John tells us that they were members of seven churches, in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and

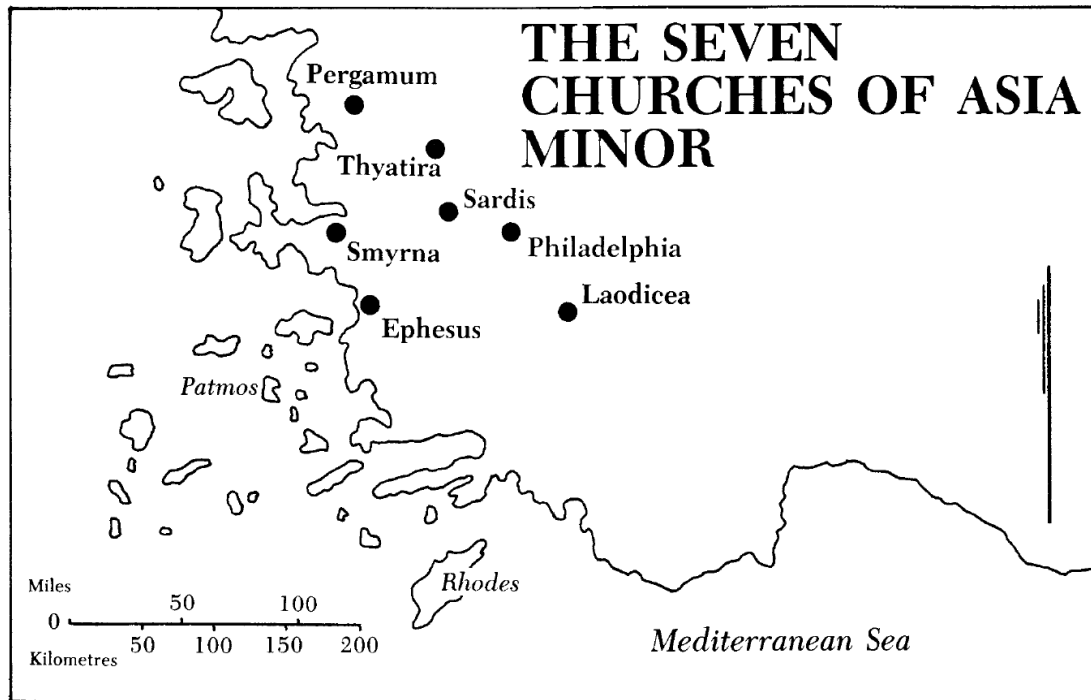
⁵ Barnett has *limen* (meaning ‘harbour’ or ‘haven’), however the Greek has *limnē*; evidently a typographical error by Barnett’s publishers.

⁶ *Apocalypse Now and Then: Reading Revelation Today*, AIO, Sydney Square, 1989, p. 69.

⁷ *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, p. 54.

⁸ *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, p. 194.

Laodicea. These were cities in the Roman province of Asia, located in the western end of modern Turkey.⁹



Knowing where they lived is helpful. We also know a lot about their situation. The seven 'letters' in chapters 2 and 3 provide some information about these churches and there are other comments throughout the book which add to the picture. There is persecution, some have even died for their faith and many are evidently sorely tempted to give up. To an extent, the book is basically 'a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus' (14:12). Of course, in that regard the first audiences are no different from all the other recipients of New Testament letters etc. See Luke 8:15; 21:19; Romans 5:3-4; 15:14-15; Colossians 1:11; 1 Timothy 6:11; Titus 2:2; Hebrews 10:36; James 1:3-4; 5:7-11, and, in Revelation, 1:9; 2:2, 19; 3:10 and 13:10.

There seems general agreement that John wrote Revelation towards the end of the first century, during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian but, whether it was then or in the reign of Nero, that sort of detail adds little to the overall thrust of the book. Of course it might be interesting to discover more of the details about the time when Revelation was written, because we might then get answers to some questions that have puzzled people for centuries, for instance, the difficult statement in 17:9-10, but, even then, we would probably not satisfy everyone.

Let me add a note here about the various ways Christian readers have approached the Revelation. Mostly I want to do this because most 'popular' writing which refers to or uses the book does so from the position of a quite vocal minority and so most ordinary readers today will have that position influencing them to varying degrees.

⁹ The map is taken from Barnett, *Apocalypse Now and Then*.

The book of the Revelation fits into a particular category called ‘apocalyptic’. The category takes its name from the Greek title of the book, but the category was quite widely known and used in the first century. Underlying apocalyptic writing is a recognition that it is too late to change things, whereas the prophets knew that their messages of judgment were conditional, that is they knew that *if* their readers or hearers repented, the promised judgment would not take place (see Jonah 3). Apocalyptic writings, on the other hand appear as a ‘tracts for hard times’,¹⁰ urging the readers to persevere because the end of all things is assured.

However, the most conspicuous feature of apocalyptic is its use of symbolism. Basically, there are four approaches to the book and these are four different ways of explaining the meaning of the symbolism. The first, called the *Preterist*¹¹ approach, sees Revelation as a book to be completely understood in terms of the hopes of the first-century church and in the light of its own experiences. The second, the *Historical* approach, ‘views the Revelation as a symbolic prophecy of the entire history of the church down to the return of Christ and the end of the age’.¹² The third, the *Idealist* or *Symbolical* approach, sees the symbols as referring to principles that are at work in history rather than to particular historical events. The Fourth, the *Futurist*, comes in two forms, one which sees history divided into ‘dispensations’ or periods of time and which also regards the nation of Israel as distinct from the church and as still having a supremely significant role within the purposes of God and so divides the book of revelation up according to this scheme. The other form simply regards the Revelation as referring to the final unravelling of history as it concerns the church in the world.

So what of my question about the sea being no more? I want to suggest that the key, or at least one of the keys, to understanding the symbolism of Revelation lies in the Old Testament and that that observation may cause us to understand that John saw something so extraordinary in his vision, which he then described in the language of God’s prior word to humanity, that he had to say, in effect, ‘I’ve seen it. History now makes sense and, what is more, I can see the amazing dimensions of our redemption.’

Surprisingly, John does not quote from the Old Testament at all; he does, though, allude to it so many times, both obviously and subtly, that there is no agreement as to the number of allusions in the book. Some of the allusions are meant to be plain — once you see them. For instance, 21:16 describes the city John sees, the bride of Christ, as being a cube 2400 kilometers in each direction. Given that its walls are only said to be one hundred and forty four cubits (about seventy two meters) high, obviously there is something else being said. And, I suggest, there is. I Kings 6:20 says:

The interior of the inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high; he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid the altar with cedar.

If we assume, correctly it would seem from the hundreds of allusions to the Old Testament, that John was conditioned to describe what he saw in Old Testament terms, then he would be saying that the bride of Christ, the great city, was purposefully of the same proportions as the holy of holies in the temple in Jerusalem. But I want to suggest that John is going far further than just using the Old Testament

¹⁰ The phrase is taken from G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 10.

¹¹ From the Latin *praeter*, meaning ‘past’.

¹² Ladd, *Revelation*, p. 11.

as a source for his language. He is saying that he has seen the reality on which the Old Testament structures were patterned. So in 4:1ff he tells us that he was given to see the true, heavenly sanctuary where all is complete and rich with pure worship. This is the way it was intended to be and this is the way it is!

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."²At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!³And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.⁵Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God;⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind:⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,
"Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come."⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,
¹¹"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created."

When Moses was on the mountain (Ex. 24:15; cf. Rev. 21:10) he was shown the way he was to construct the tabernacle, the tent where the worship activities were to take place; he saw 'the pattern of the tabernacle' (Ex. 25:9). The times he spent there on the mountain were so transforming that later we are told that

As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them.³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face;³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded,³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (Ex. 34:29-35).

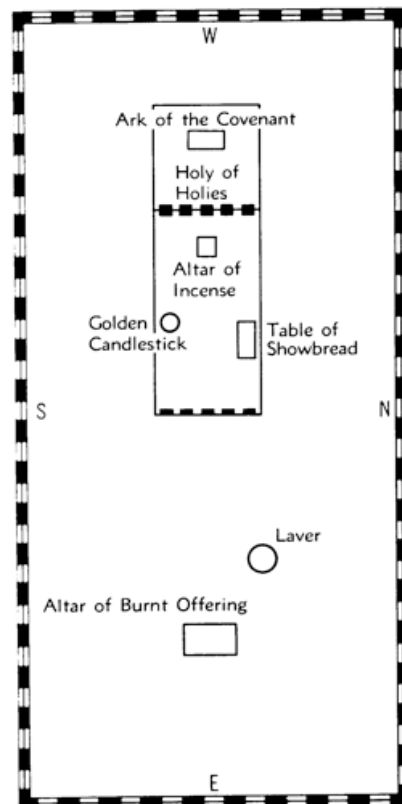
The presence of God was so overwhelming that it was fearsome to those who were not participants in the worship (cf. Ex. 33:17 – 34:8). Moses was there and so the tabernacle was built to express that great 'heavenly' worship within Israel. Israel's worship, with its cultus, that is, its whole system for worship, with priests and sacrifices and special days and special colors and special clothing and so on, was by no means the final form. It was only the shadow of the substance. Thus Hebrews 8:1-5 says:

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ²a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”

The heavenly sanctuary is the real sanctuary. It is not merely ahead of us in history; it is always the reality and faith actually participates in it, albeit by means of the visible and tangible forms we use. But John, like Moses, saw it and in seeing it he saw all things.

That sea which is no more can at least be understood in terms of the visible representation of true worship as it appeared in Israel. To understand Israel’s worship is to understand the visible form of what is yet to us invisible. Exodus 30:17-21 describes the construction of the bronze basin, at which the priests were to wash themselves before they carry out their duties. When Solomon built the temple, 1 Kings 7:23-26 calls its replacement ‘the molten sea’. It was ten cubits (about five meters) in diameter. But without it, the priests could not represent Israel before God in any way; unless they washed themselves in it before their service they would die. Now, in the new creation, in Rev. 21, there is no longer that sea. Those in the new creation are the ones who have been ‘made ... a kingdom, priests to [our] God and Father’ (1:6). And they are clean, with their robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb (7:14).¹³

The following diagram may assist us to understand the layout of the tabernacle.



¹³ Some manuscripts have, in 1:5f, ‘to him who loves us and *washed* us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom etc’.