



The Book of Revelation in Africa

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CHRISTIAN LITURGY, HYMNS, AND ART ARE SATURATED WITH THE THEOLOGY, symbolism, and language of the book of Revelation. Yet, the book remains enigmatic and problematic,¹ also in Africa. This article attempts to highlight the significance of the book of Revelation for African churches and the strengths and weaknesses of their interpretation.

I. THE VARIETY OF INTERPRETATIONS

In Africa, the book of Revelation has been interpreted in as many ways as in other parts of Christendom. Many mainline churches use it minimally; it is seldom included in lectionaries. Yet within these churches, lay and ordained Christians read it outside of worship settings as a means of comfort, exhortation, and warning, as well as in evangelical outreach. It is read as word of God, like any other book of the Bible. Common evangelistic themes are derived from Revelation: "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life," or "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

For some churches, like the African indigenous churches, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and others with a strong teleological focus, Revelation is the

¹It was debated and rejected by many church fathers including Marcion, Dionysius of Alexandria, the Synod of Laodicea, Cyril of Jerusalem, etc. Revelation was the last book accepted in the canon. Even the reformers, like Martin Luther, had a hard time accepting it as Christian scripture.

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main book of teaching and preaching. The book is a major source of authority and a chief reason for the existence of several indigenous churches. Their leaders find the prophecies in the book fulfilled in their own time and space. They emphasize concepts like the new Jerusalem, singing in the presence of the Lord, worship, the lamb, etc. The mysterious nature of the book gives leaders a foundation to claim unique authority as proper interpreters of the secrets of the book, a situation which in turn works to sustain these churches, while also creating numerous factions.

This diversity of African interpretation of Revelation results from the history of the African church. On the one hand it is part of the single Christian church around the world. But on the other, African Christians have for a long time been mere consumers of western theology. For various reasons, especially poverty, very few indigenous Christians have been able to take up the task of publishing or contributing to global theological knowledge, especially in biblical interpretation. The limited amount of literature published by African thinkers forces African churches to learn and teach theological insights taken predominantly from other areas of Christendom.² As a result, the African church is as divided as the western church in its interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Because of the diversity of theological approaches, it is impossible to present a theology of Revelation that can claim to be *the* African approach. This study will seek merely to identify the strengths and the difficulties in African interpretation. The assumption is that these insights, though based only on East African experience, will be a useful contribution to the global church in our common struggle to hear God speaking to us today through the book.

II. DIFFICULTIES IN AFRICAN INTERPRETATION

African interpretations of Revelation exhibit several difficulties, some of which are shared with other parts of the world.

First, let us consider the difficulties of language. The language of Revelation is mystical and symbolic. There are many words like the dragon, Hades, etc., which will be difficult to translate accurately. There are two options in dealing with these. One would be to leave the words obscure. But this choice risks inaccuracy and lack of understanding. The second would be to translate them with their most closely corresponding words. Once again, this choice risks misconception and misinterpretation. For example, the dragon has been translated in Swahili as "*joka kubwa*" which literally means "a huge snake." The conceptual world of East African people contains nothing like the dragon that is common in some other peoples' folktales. But what is conveyed by translating the dragon as a snake, which may symbolize different things in different traditions?

²Note the collapse of attempts by the WCC to help establish and sustain effective theological literature in the younger churches, described in Christine Lienemann-Perrin, *Training for a Relevant Ministry: A Study of the Contribution of the Theological Education Fund* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society; Geneva: The Programme on Theological Education of the World Council of Churches, 1981). With the exception of South Africa, Africa has produced very little adequate theological literature. African theological libraries are stacked with a disproportionate amount of non-African publications.

Another weakness is educational. Many Africans are barely literate.³ That means most of them rely only on listening. Truly, the book was intended to be read and heard (22:18).⁴ The book of Revelation has a very complex structure, however. It needs to be read as whole in order to comprehend its overall message. Without repeated reading and the opportunity to go back and check, it is not easy to recognize the repetitions, patterns, and symbols of the book. For example, it is clear that things which have disappeared at one point reappear later. In mere listening there is the risk of a linear understanding of the apocalypse as a plot, which will produce mistakes in interpretation.

Illiteracy is not the only educational weakness. Generally, few people know anything about the background of the book. The world in which the book was written is very obscure to most readers. Therefore it is difficult to relate its symbolism to actual events because the same symbols may carry different meanings in different cultures. For example, the significance of symbolic numbers like ten, seven, and three would need to be explained. The burning of incense may carry other connotations, since in East Africa it is burnt by Moslems and Hindus for very different reasons. The symbol of the throne may be fading among younger Africans since kingship has been abolished. The image of the rulers who have replaced the kings is vague. Ugandans may relate the throne to Iddi Amin and Milton Obote whom they do not wish to remember. Tanzanians may have an image of corrupt leaders who have no absolute and permanent authority, but who are influenced by ethnic and religious factors.

Another difficulty is the confusion produced among African Christians by listening to different people interpreting the book differently. Many African Christians are open to the gospel. They listen carefully and tend to believe the preacher. Therefore they are confused by conflicting interpretations. In the same way, the application of the book is different in different places. A Lutheran Christian may come with the obscure stance given the book by a lectionary. He meets someone on the street who gives him the Swahili translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses *Watchtower* free of charge. In it, he will find very terrifying information that he cannot ignore if he believes in the second coming of Christ. He will be invited to another friend's house where they will see the movie *A Thief in the Night*. He will go to his pastor who may simply say, "They are lying, they are only sheep-stealers. Stay away from them!" He stays confused.

III. STRENGTHS OF AFRICAN INTERPRETATION

Despite the difficulties, Africans have certain strengths which put them at an advantage as they approach the book. These strengths would be very useful as an

³Even in Tanzania, with the highest literacy rate in Africa, only a minority own and read Bibles. For economic and social reasons, non-academic reading is not a priority.

⁴The book was written to be read aloud by someone while the audience was listening. It was not intended to be studied with the piles of reference tools contemporary scholars assume as inevitable. See David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment," *Interpretation* 40 (July 1986) 243-256.

African contribution to the global church in our common struggle to understand Revelation.

First, there are similarities between the worldview of Revelation and the African worldview. The world of both Revelation and Africa includes this world and the other. The way the other world relates to this one is also similar. The dead are still living in the other world, and they influence the life of those in this world. The other world, where the dead and the gods dwell, is mysterious and supernatural, violent, vengeful, and merciful.⁵ Therefore, it is easy for Africans to believe that John really saw the things he wrote about.

Second, the picture of God presented in the book of Revelation corresponds to the African understanding of God. God is the almighty, the awesome. All creatures must bow and worship, face down, on their knees, before this God. God has absolute control over the whole world. You don't approach God in prayer with your hands in your pockets. You don't make jokes when you are worshipping; you are before the almighty! But what image does a teenager in the western world get when she hears of "the one who sits on the throne"? In countries where nobody has authority over another, where a parent has trouble in finding a way to discipline a child that will not be called abuse, where no authority is feared because everybody is supposed to be serving "me," what analogy can parents use to show the God of Revelation in relation to creation? In a society dominated by autonomy, how would one interpret a verse like this:

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, "Halleluyah! Salvation and glory and power belong to God, because his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants" (Rev 19:1-2)?

Is this God one people like? If not, what do we do, if in fact God avenges the blood of his servants? Most African people have more recent traditions of rulers and kings. Most African children are still raised with the clear knowledge that the world does not consist of their interests alone; that there are things beyond human control. It may be easier for them to perceive the God of Revelation as one to whom a person may run for refuge, as the mighty fortress who can protect us from powerful enemies by crushing them.

Another strength is the African love of mysteries. Many people do not think it is necessary to understand every word of a message in order for it to be true. Religious language is supposed to be mythical, mysterious. The priest is the one who may know some things that others don't, and they remain satisfied. Therefore the mysterious nature of the book of Revelation makes it more appreciated. The fact that its symbols and images are not clear does not deter Africans from believ-

⁵Africans have not found a certain explanation of the place of the dead. The Bible seems to give no shortcut answer. Are they with Jesus now, physically? Where will they be raised from? What state are they in? Rotten corpses? See Hans-Jürgen Becken, "Beware of the Ancestor Cult! A Challenge to Missiological Research in South Africa," *Missionalia* 21 (1993) 333-339.

ing it. They know that total rational comprehension is not necessary in divine matters.⁶

Another strength is the African custom of anonymity. Most traditional stories, folk tales, proverbs, songs, and even Christian hymns are anonymous. Ideas were not commercialized. Anonymity, however, does not make the ideas less effective. It is never a preoccupation of African people to know which individual composed a certain hymn or proverb. And these are distributed without charge. It is only recently that Africa has adopted the copyright mentality.⁷ Therefore, the validity and effectiveness of the composition is not affected by the identity of the composer. Whether the John who wrote the book was the apostle or whether he was John at all does not matter. Africans are not interested in the personality of the person behind the composition. This makes some of the issues discussed most in New Testament scholarship concerning the book irrelevant. The value of the text stands in the text itself, as it is.

Another advantage is belief in the supernatural and in revelations. African people believe that revelations of what is going to happen in the future, whether by dreams or visions, are possible and even common in people's relationship with the other world.⁸ Therefore, Africans need not trouble themselves with whether John saw the revelation as he says or whether he is making it up. Are we to look for John's ingenuity and mastery of composition instead of trying to understand what the revelation is about? Is it more difficult to understand it as a real revelation than trying to find explanations for a composition that someone invented? It is one thing to say: "Here John wanted to tell his readers..." and it is quite another to say: "Here John saw (or heard or read or was told)..."

Another strength comes from the rich symbolism of Revelation, which in many respects corresponds to symbolism in Africa. For instance, the dominant symbols of the lamb, the throne, the blood, and the animals are common in African religious symbolism. The sacrificial blood as well as innocent human blood crying from the ground (Rev 6:10) correspond to present-day African beliefs. No one in Africa can expect to get away with shedding innocent blood. At the same time, the lamb as the animal of sacrifice slaughtered for the sins of humanity is a dominant symbol both in Revelation and in African beliefs. Therefore, the interpretation of the book of Revelation can easily relate to African symbols. However, the symbolic nature of the material must be strictly emphasized. Africans can erroneously interpret the symbolism literally—e.g., expecting a heaven with golden gates

⁶When African priests were possessed by their spirits, they spoke in unintelligible languages, and no one asked what they meant. Even in family prayers, leaders used mysterious words. As a result, when missionaries came and started teaching, Africans never asked the meaning of such words as "Hosanna," "Halleluja," "Kyrie Eleison," but they sang them with joy and even wrote hymns using those mysterious words.

⁷Most hymns of African origin now used worldwide are inscribed "anonymous" or "from Liberia" or "South African melody." Then non-Africans who compile and write down this music claim and retain the copyrights; annoyingly, even Africans themselves cannot use the hymns without written permission from the secondary developers. If there is economic gain, Africans do not share it.

⁸See stories in Richard Mutembei, *Kristo au Wamara* (Bukoba, Tanzania: Northwestern, 1994).

where the conquerors will get the beautiful homes they had always dreamed of. Africans, like other Christians, will fully comprehend the mysteries only when that day comes when we see the Lord face to face.

IV. SOME OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The African focus in interpreting the book of Revelation should probably be more theological than historical. It need not spin its wheels seeking "certain" historical information, following the tradition of the western enlightenment. It is not clear whether such information, even if it were to be found, would have a helpful impact on our understanding of the message.

Christians must adhere to or recover their mystical and awesome approach to God. They should study the book as scripture, expecting to hear from God, rather than reading Revelation only as a historic work of art.

Christians must allow diversity of applications. There should be no grumbling about how people are experiencing the book. For instance, South Africans were for a long time in the throes of apartheid. Indigenous Africans saw the book as a comfort, full of the message of hope as they faced a brutal and evil regime.⁹ The interpretative approach was therefore political. But now that apartheid is officially gone, the symbol of evil will no longer be racial. South Africans will read the book of Revelation differently.¹⁰ In Eastern Africa where the priority is evangelism and church planting (notwithstanding strong commitment to social action) in a church confronted by the powers of Islam and traditional religions, the book may be used to admonish the members while inviting the non-members. In places where there is moral decay and the deterioration of a worshipful approach to God, Revelation may provide a powerful way to reveal the awesome nature of God, so believers come before this God with a proper perspective.

This book will tell much about the Christ whom Christians need—the almighty; the lamb, ironically on a horse, who comes to love and call, but who, at the same time, will crush with vengeance the powers of evil. It is not a question of having the right doctrine of Christ, it is about the experience of the person of Christ here and now. Despite the many conflicting interpretations and devaluations of the book of Revelation (even by Martin Luther), it remains a rich source of comfort and hope for the church.¹¹

⁹See Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).

¹⁰There are signs of this trend. See, e.g., Musawenkosi D. Biyela, "Beyond the Kairos Document: Christology for a Post-Apartheid South Africa" (Th.D diss., Luther Seminary, 1994). The 1994 Annual Congress of the South Africa Missiological Society had as its theme: "Mission in a Changing South Africa: Towards Holistic Liberation."

¹¹Walter Taylor, Jr. has published in *The Lutheran* (October 1993-September 1994) a series of twelve studies on the book of Revelation under the title "Reclaiming the Book of Revelation."