

## Lecture Four: Catholic Epistles and Apocalypse

by Donald Hagner

### James

A great portion of the book of James contains various ethical exhortations that would be equally at home in both the OT and the NT. James amounts to a form of Christian wisdom literature. The addressees are “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1)<sup>1</sup>, which sounds appropriate for Jewish Christian readers, of course; but it is not necessary to restrict the intended readership to Jews. Very possibly this address could reflect the view of the Church as the true Israel (cf. Mt 19:28; Rev 21:12-14), alluding to the fulfillment of the promises to Israel. To be noted in this connection is the address of 1 Peter, which is clearly a document written to Gentile Christians (cf. 2:9-10; 4:3-4)—“to the exiles of the Dispersion” (1:1).

There are a couple of references to the Law in James that represent a Christian view of the Law, paradoxically not unlike Paul’s. James writes:

For if any are hearers of the law and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they are like. But those who look into the perfect law, at the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing (1:23-25).

Again, in 2:12, he writes, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty” (cf. “the royal law,” 2:8). The “law of liberty” reflects a Christian view of the Law of Moses as mediated through the teaching of Jesus.

As for the famous difference between James and Paul on the subject of the Law and works, Paul would essentially agree with James

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise noted.

that faith without works is dead. To be sure, Genesis 15:6 is quoted to a different end, and Paul would not articulate the problem using the same language as James. In reality, however, James appears to be correcting a perversion of Paul's view of the Law, making an emphasis with which Paul would be in full accord. Whether James would have considered his view of the Law as being in tension with the place and role of Law in the OT, as Paul seems to have, is debatable.

### **1 Peter**

From the beginning of this epistle, the newness of what God has done in Christ is in clear view:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1:3-5).

The readers have not seen Christ, yet they love him, believe in him, “and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1:8-9).

We have in these opening passages a combination of realized and future eschatology. The new birth of salvation is already the possession of the Christian, and yet full salvation lies in the indeterminate future. The progress of salvation history involves a degree of discontinuity with the past:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look (1:10-12).

The prophets realized that the time of fulfillment, the time of “grace” and “the subsequent glory,” would not be enjoyed by them but by those living in the future, to whom the “good news” would be brought “by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.” “The things that have now been announced to you” refer to the gospel that had been proclaimed to the readers. That gospel is so wondrous that it involves things into which even “angels long to look.”

The readers are encouraged to prepare themselves and to “set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed” (1:13). The grace of salvation is already theirs, yet the promises are not yet fully realized. There is more to come. The author continues by mentioning the ransom of the readers by the blood of Christ, in a sacrifice analogous to those of the temple— “like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.”:

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1:18-21).

The atonement accomplished by Christ on the cross is definitive. This was the realization of God’s purpose from “before the foundation of the world,” but revealed now “at the end of the ages for your sake.” While the newness of this eschatological revelation is evident, there is also the usual underlying continuity wherein the readers are said to have “come to trust in God,” and have their faith and hope “set on God.” The new birth mentioned in 1:3 is elaborated in 1:23-25: “You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. For ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’ That word is the good news that was announced to you.”

The new birth is mediated “through the living and enduring word of God.” The quotation drawn from Isaiah 40:7-8 affirms the imperishable character of God’s word. Then our author identifies that word with “the good news that was announced to you.”<sup>2</sup> The new birth

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. in a somewhat different context, Paul’s identification of God’s word in Deuteronomy 30:14 with the gospel—“that is, the word of faith that we proclaim” (Rom 10:8).

is part and parcel of the new age that dawns with the coming of Christ announced by the gospel.

One of the strongest expressions of discontinuity in the NT is found in Chapter 2. Here language hitherto reserved exclusively for Israel is now applied to the Church, consisting (largely) of Gentiles. The author cites three “stone Logia” (2:6-8) drawn from Isaiah 28:16 (a chosen and precious cornerstone), from Psalm 118:22 (the rejected head of the corner), and from Isaiah 8:14 (the stone of stumbling). The author invites the readers to come to Jesus like living stones to “be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood and to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). Then, in a most remarkable fashion, Peter applies Israel’s special OT titles to the Gentile church: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ‘Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy’” (2:9-10).

This application of titles is especially impressive since they are so closely tied to the identity of a particular group. That such titles could be applied to a Gentile group is nothing short of astonishing. And to make the point unmistakable, Peter employs language drawn from Hosea 1:6, 9 and 2:25. This material originally referred to God’s forgiveness of disobedient Israel, but it is now applied to those who were previously excluded from Israel’s election. Paul uses the same material from Hosea to justify the propriety of the Gentile mission in Romans 9:25-26.

This transfer of terminology makes it a natural conclusion that the Church is now regarded as the true Israel. The Church is the heir of the promises to Israel. This is clearly an element of very strong discontinuity, but it must not be taken to mean that Israel *qua* Israel has fallen out of God’s consideration altogether. If God’s purpose is finally accomplished through the Church, it does not mean that Israel cannot also be a part of the consummation at the end of the age. (Paul’s discussion in Romans 11 is the most complete word on the future of Israel, providing assurance that God will not utterly reject his people.)

A new means of salvation marks the new era—“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (3:18). A reference to the days of Noah and the eight persons who “were saved through water” turns the thoughts of our author to baptism: “And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ who has gone into

heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him” (3:21-22). Baptism in the name of Christ means participation in the atoning work of Christ, and, hence, the enjoyment of eternal salvation.<sup>3</sup> This is new and an element of discontinuity between past and present.

### Jude and 2 Peter

The brief books of Jude and 2 Peter do not contain much that contributes to our specific interests in these lectures. One thing that does stand out, however, is the frequent use of OT examples that are applied directly to the readers. These have the effect of emphasizing continuity in God’s dealing with humanity, thus underlining the overarching unity of the Bible’s story.

Jude speaks of the necessity of contending for “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints”—i.e., “the salvation we share” (3). In verse 5, Jude refers to the example of the deliverance of the Jews in the Exodus—“Now I desire to remind you, though you are fully informed, that the Lord, who once for all saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.” The application made to the readers presupposes the underlying continuity of the story of salvation. The position of the phrase, “once for all,” is textually uncertain, with some manuscripts having the words (i.e., *hapax*) modifying the participle ‘informed,’<sup>4</sup> others as modifying the participle ‘saved.’ “Once for all saved a people,” taken as supporting the election of Israel, heightens the continuity between old and new.

Jude is famous for its quotation of Enoch, one of the very few quotations of non-canonical material in the NT. According to Jude:

Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, “See the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (14-15).

As is well known, the quoted material actually derives not from the seventh generation from Adam, but from a pseudepigraphic book known to scholars as 1Enoch (1:9), written sometime between the

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<sup>3</sup>1 Peter’s references to new birth and baptism have led scholars to the conclusion that it contains fragments of a baptismal liturgy.

<sup>4</sup>Thus the margin of the NRSV: “though you were once for all fully informed, that Jesus (or Joshua) who saved.”

beginning of the 2nd century BC and the end of the 1st Century AD. In the application of this material to his Christian readers, Jude stresses the continuity and accomplishment of God's purposes, even if the letter does not stretch all the way back to the Enoch of the book of Genesis (5:18).

Strong continuity with the old is affirmed in this interesting passage in 2 Peter 1:19-21:

So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scriptures is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The ground for the statement in the first sentence is the voice from heaven that was heard on the Mount of Transfiguration, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (1:17). This is regarded as a confirmation of the promises (cf. 1:4). Since the promises will surely come to pass, they must be attended to (like light in a dark place) until the day of fulfillment, "until the day dawns and the morning star rises"—language referring to the arrival of messianic fulfillment (see Num 24:17; Rev 22:16, "the bright morning star"). After all, prophesy does not find its origin in human action, but only its agency. The inspiring impetus behind biblical prophecy is the Holy Spirit. God speaks through the prophets. The author of 2 Peter knows himself and his readers to be living in the age promised by the prophets and in the fulfillment of that expectation.

Our author holds together the OT prophets and the NT apostles. "I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles" (3:1-2). This is a strong and significant continuity that unites the two parallel founts of revelation in one encompassing narrative of salvation, presupposing its unity.

Clearly, there was a crisis in the community caused by the delay of the parousia. Scoffers were asking, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" (3:4). Although the complaint ignores the aspects of realized eschatology that point to fulfillment, it does call attention to the continued delay of the consummation and the full dawning of the Eschaton. Contemporary Jews who look at the NT

lodge the same complaint and reject any notion that the kingdom has, in any sense, been already realized. This perspective reflects unmodified continuity with the past. Not for a moment, however, will our author agree with the claim that nothing has changed. Time is an elastic concept. “With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come alike a thief” (3:8-10).

The author insists in full confidence that, “In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home,” adding this admonition—“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation” (3:14-15). If the expectation is continuous with that of the (orthodox) Jews, the presence of a degree of realized eschatology and the return of Christ as the key event of the future comprise a clear element of discontinuity.

### **The Apocalypse (Revelation)**

The “Apocalypse of Jesus Christ,” the opening words of the book and its *de facto* title, known otherwise as the Revelation to John, is essentially a book about fulfillment, and thus a book rich in themes of continuity and discontinuity. Indeed, the Apocalypse can be described as detailing the future outworking and fulfillment of the promises of the Scriptures of Israel, with all the discontinuity and newness intrinsic to that fulfillment, but also in terms of the broad underlying continuity that unites the totality of the old and the new. The old is referred to naturally, just as much of the language is naturally drawn from the OT. Much of this is true throughout Revelation, and here we provide only some vivid examples.

In the opening words to the seven churches, we encounter language similar to what we saw in 1 Peter 2:9. In an opening doxology, John writes, “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1:5-6). Jewish and Gentile Christians are designated priests who serve God. This reflects the new reality of the Church and, hence, discontinuity.

The Christology of Revelation focuses on the divine identity of Jesus, ascribing to him titles and attributes of God, often overlapping with descriptions of God the Father. In accord with prophecies of the Synoptic Gospels, John writes: “Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:7-8).

This is followed by John’s vision of “one like the Son of Man” (1:12-20), in which this glorious visage says to him, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades” (1:17-18).

Each of the seven letters begins with a brief indication of the identity of the speaker, usually employing images or language drawn from the opening vision of Christ. The last of these reads, “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write, ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin [*archē*] of God’s creation’” (3:14). So too, each letter ends with a promise to those who are “conquerors.” These often correspond to eschatological realities described at the end of the book, as we can see from 21:7—“Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” At the end of the letter to the church at Ephesus comes the promise, “To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (2:7; cf. 22:2, 14, 19). At the end of the letter to Laodicea, the one who conquers is promised “a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3:21), which corresponds to 20:4.

A passage critical of the Jews occurs in the letters to the church at Smyrna and the church at Philadelphia. To Smyrna, “I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9). And to Philadelphia, “I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you” (3:9). A distinction is drawn here between true Jews and those who claim to be Jews. The latter, by their slanderous opposition to the Christians and rejection of the gospel, indicate that their allegiance is to Satan rather than to God. The parting of the ways between synagogue and church is obviously well underway at the end of the 1st century AD, at least in western Asia Minor.

In the letter to Pergamum, John employs the example of Balaam and Balak, who “put a stumbling block before the people of Israel” (2:14), and refers to “hidden manna” and “a white stone” (2:17)—perhaps allusions to admission to the messianic banquet (i.e., “the marriage supper of the Lamb,” 19:9; cf. Mt 8:11; 22:2; 25:10).

To those of the church of Thyatira who conquer and do the works of Jesus to the end, he says, “I will give my authority over the nations;

to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered—even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star” (2:26-28). The first words of this passage are clearly a quotation of Psalm 2:9 and indicate that the Thyatira Christians will participate in the messianic rule over the nations. A similar point, namely, a sharing in the messianic status, must be made in the reference to “the morning star” (cf. 22:16). Compare the words spoken to the conquerors of Sardis—“They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes” (3:4-5; cf. 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:8; 22:14).

The church of Philadelphia is addressed with this opening statement—“These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (3:7). This holy one is the Messiah, “the root and the descendant of David” (22:6). Here we have strong continuity in language, while, at the same time, discontinuity in terms of the identity of the Davidic descendant. Further substantial continuity is encountered in the closing words of this letter—“If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem [21:2] that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (3:12; 7:3). By means of highly metaphorical language, John identifies the one who conquers as securely a member of the eschatological community, a recipient of the heavenly Jerusalem and marked by the name of God and of the city and by Christ’s new name (for this, see 19:12).

The revelation proper begins in Chapter 4, with the vision of the heavenly worship of the one who sits upon the throne, to whom the “four living creatures” sing the Trisagion—“Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (4:8). Before this figure the twenty four elders cast their crowns, singing “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they exist and were created” (4:11).

Chapter 5 turns our attention to “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered,” identified further as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (5:5-6), who alone is worthy to open the sealed scroll. The elders, with harps and bowls of incense, sing “a new song”—“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth” (5:9-10).

In Chapter 7, a great multitude, who had made their robes “white in the blood of the Lamb,” is portrayed before God’s throne:

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (7:15-17).

The biblical imagery is unmistakable, but now it is applied to the dramatically new circumstances of apocalyptic fulfillment.

The narrative of the two witnesses in Chapter 11 is filled with OT allusions that we need not tabulate in detail here. Imagery drawn from Zechariah 4 (the two olive trees) and especially Daniel 7 (the 42 months, or 1,260 days [3½ years]) is immediately evident.

Chapter 12 describes a great portent in the attempt of a great red dragon, symbolizing the Devil or Satan (12:9), to destroy the messianic child, “who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (12:5). War breaks out in heaven, and the archangel Michael and his angels defeat the dragon (12:8). Then John hears “a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah’” (12:10).

Chapter 13 again draws imagery from Daniel 7 in its description of the first beast, rising from the sea, and the second beast, rising from the earth. They are the minions of the dragon and oppose the work of Christ. Their exact identity is debated, but they may represent the Antichrist and the false prophet, respectively (cf. 16:13). On Mount Zion, John sees the Lamb together with the 144,000 “who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” and who alone are able to “sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders” (14:1-3; cf. 5:9). John next sees

... another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. 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” (14:6-7).

Two further angels speak of the coming judgment, to which John adds, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to their faith in Jesus”<sup>5</sup> (14:12). The reference to an “eternal gospel [*euaggelion aiōnion*]” obviously underlines continuity, as does the linking of the creator God with final judgment and the reference to keeping “the commandments of God” alongside the reference to faith in Jesus.

Chapter 15 presents John’s account of “another portent in heaven,” consisting of “seven angels with seven plagues” and a crowd of “those who had conquered the beast,” who “sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (15:3). The single song that follows bears no relationship to the Song of Moses of Exodus 15:1-18 or of Deuteronomy 31:30-32:43. The majority of commentators agree that only one song is in view, expressing sentiments of victory common to Moses and the Lamb—“Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you” (15:3-4). It is as though the victory of Moses in the Exodus is the same victory as that of the Lamb. It is the same omnipotent God, who is King over all and to whom worship is due, in both the OT and the NT. Here is strong continuity binding together the history of salvation.

It is particularly the final two chapters of the Apocalypse that bring together the themes and motifs of continuity/discontinuity. The end corresponds closely to the beginning; eschatology corresponds to protology. This fact alone demonstrates continuity. But since the end is the fulfillment of the beginning, it also involves the new in contrast with the old. Themes encountered in earlier chapters are occasionally repeated here, and we encounter a fair bit of repetition for emphasis.

In Chapter 21, John sees “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”<sup>6</sup> He continues:

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying

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<sup>5</sup>Following the marginal reading of the NRSV. In the text NRSV (like RSV) translates “the faith of Jesus.” The difference is caused by a problem that has received much recent discussion in Pauline studies, namely whether *tēn pistin Iēsous* is to be understood as a subjective or objective genitive. Here, in my opinion, the objective sense is more convincing than the subjective—hence, “faith in Jesus.” Either interpretation supports the idea of continuity between present and past.

<sup>6</sup>The sea here symbolizes the domain of evil, and the sentence declares the end of evil.

“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; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (21:1-6).

The end of the Apocalypse exults in the passing of the old with its imperfections and the coming of the new with its promised perfection. What is coming is comprehensively new—“See I am making all things new.” Key symbols for the new reality are the metaphors of “a new heaven and a new earth” and “the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven (cf. 3:12).” Now is the time for the fulfillment of the prophetic hope, as when Isaiah wrote:

For I am about to create new heaven and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy. . . . No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it or the cry of distress. . . . They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (65:17-25; cf. 66:22-23).

Further agreement with the prophets can be seen in 21:6-7—“To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children” (21:6-7). A further reference to the new Jerusalem is found in 21:9-10, where the angel says to John, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem doing down out of heaven from God.” The description of the city that follows refers to the twelve gates in the surrounding walls, “and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites,” while on the city’s twelve foundations are inscribed “the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (21:12, 14). Here both dispensations are mentioned, providing a strong sense of continuity, but also newness involving discontinuity.

After the description of the new Jerusalem, John concludes with the following remark:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:22-27).

While the temple reaches back to the OT and is thus obviously an element of continuity, the temple in the new Jerusalem is not a physical building but the very presence of “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.” This newness constitutes a strong discontinuity. So too, the light of the new Jerusalem is “the glory of God” and its “lamp is the Lamb” (cf. 22:5). There is no night in the new Jerusalem; its gates will never be shut. “The glory and the honor of the nations” will be brought into the city. This is the language of apocalyptic and to be understood as metaphorical and symbolic, not literally. Here, as throughout the final chapters of the Apocalypse, we have the dramatic newness of the Eschaton, where the capability of language is often stretched to its limits.

Chapter 22 begins with the climactic final vision the angel gives to John, the vision of the river of life and the tree of life:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river, is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (22:1-5; cf. 2:7; 21:23).

Again, symbolic language portrays the experience of the end time. The throne is notably the throne of both God and the Lamb. This unusual indication of the divine identity of the Lamb, like much Christology in the NT, points both to significant continuity and

discontinuity. The river and the tree are symbols of eternal life for the participants in the consummation of God's purposes. The connections with the OT are striking. Ezekiel 47:1-12 tells of a vision of a river "flowing from below the threshold of the temple," a river whose water brings life to the Dead Sea, which is transformed into a fresh-water lake teeming with fish. On both banks of this river, furthermore, are fruit-bearing trees. "Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing" (Ezek 47:12).

Of the new Jerusalem it is said, "Nothing accursed will be found there any more" (Rev 22:3). Material in Revelation 21-22 is reminiscent of the apocalyptic statements in Isaiah 25:7-8: "And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken." It is, in short, the time of the promised perfection of which the prophets spoke. John continues in 22:3-5—"But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever" (22:3-5). In the new Jerusalem, they see the face of God directly and without mediation. This is the ultimate eschatological hope, involving a blessedness that cannot be exceeded. Where the presence of God is, there is no need for any other light.

John is next offered a confirmation of the authority and truth of what has been revealed to him. "And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.' See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book" (22:6-7). The reference to the "spirits of the prophets" may be compared with 19:10, where the revealing angel says, "I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." Whether the genitive is subjective (the testimony made by Jesus) or objective (the testimony concerning Jesus), we have here a strong continuity between past and present. John is rebuked for a second time when he falls down at the feet of his angel revealer to worship him. "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!" (22:8-9). "The spirit of prophecy" is the

same in OT and NT; and thus, those who proclaim Jesus are put alongside John as his comrades.

Among the closing words of the book, we call attention to 22:12-13: “See, I am coming soon, my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. I am Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end;” also 22:16-17—“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.’ The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” Here again are a number of elements pointing to an obvious continuity with past revelation. And lastly, there is the renewed promise in 22:20-21—“The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.”

To summarize our findings for our theme in the Apocalypse, we must underline the reality of both continuity and discontinuity. The large fund of terminology, metaphors, and images drawn from the OT Scriptures is conspicuous. John and his readers were very familiar with these writings. Through the mediating agency of the revealing angel, John brilliantly weaves these things together to present a powerful theological platform for his prophecy of the end time. At the same time, many of the familiar items take on new significance, bringing about discontinuities caused by the inevitable newness that comes with fulfilled prophecy/apocalyptic. This does not so much involve a canceling out of the continuities, but rather their transposition to a new, higher key. While some in the history of the Church have wondered whether an Apocalypse was appropriate in the NT canon, and Revelation has been under-appreciated by many (not to mention subject to abuse by well-meaning interpreters), the book has much to offer and serves as a wonderful, climactic conclusion to the overarching metanarrative of salvation-history as the closing book of the biblical canon.

### Conclusion to Lecture Series

Continuity/discontinuity is a rich and complex subject. As we have seen, what we have here is not a matter of *either/or*, but a paradoxical *both/and*. So, in the end, is this simply a matter where the glass can be thought of as half empty or half full, depending on one’s perspective? To an extent, this may be true; yet the discontinuity, by its very nature, finally remains more determinative. The eschatological/apocalyptic character of the NT announcement of the kingdom of God and the

coming of the Son of God (the promised Messiah) alters everything. NT apocalyptic depends upon a high Christology, and the death of Jesus implies a new soteriology too. Christianity is not finally containable within the framework of Judaism. Continuity, substantial though it is, must finally yield to the discontinuity caused by the dramatic newness of what the NT announces.

That the NT is the fulfillment of the OT and that the Church is the heir of the promises to Israel are both manifested throughout the NT. With the remnant of Jewish believers in the Church, the faithfulness of God to Israel is vindicated (cf. Rom 11:1-2), quite apart from any literal fulfillment at the national level. The Church, as it moves into the new age, is the ultimate goal of God's purpose—the newly constituted people of God, including both Jews and Gentiles, returning to the bliss and perfection of Eden.

What is the significance of this undeniable newness and discontinuity for Judaism and Christianity? Newness and discontinuity can be expressed in wrong ways and with tragic consequences. For that reason, the reality and significance of continuity must never be lost sight of. The Gentile Church, after all, is a relative latecomer into the family of faith, which it enters not by birthright, but by adoption. Following in the footsteps of the Jews, the Church enjoys a (new) covenant relationship with God. There is no room for haughtiness or feelings of superiority—for the Church does not support the root of the olive tree; but rather it is the root of the olive tree that supports the Church (Rom 11:18). The church, together with Israel, depends solely upon the grace of God. Clearly, there can be no possible excuse or justification for anti-Semitism. On the contrary, Christians must stand together with their Jewish brothers and sisters against every manifestation of anti-Semitism.

Paradoxically, it is *in the Church* that Israel fulfills her commission as God's chosen and, as God's servant, to be "a light to the nations, that salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa 49:6). According to the evangelist Luke, the devout Jew Simeon, upon encountering the holy family in the temple, says that the salvation now dawning with the birth of Jesus is meant by God to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel" (Lk 2:32), thereby encompassing both realities of continuity and discontinuity.

How new is the NT? *Very new*, is my answer. And so, against the current trend in biblical scholarship to deny the newness of the NT in favor of reclaiming the totality for Judaism, I say, Let the NT be new!