THE POETIC CHARACTER OF REVELATION 4 AND 5

by

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In several passages of the Revelation of John, the One sitting on the throne and Christ, the Lamb, are honoured in direct speech by angels and other celestials. It is usual in scholarly literature to refer to these passages as (fragments of) hymnic texts. In modern text editions and translations they are often printed strophically, obviously because we are supposed to be concerned with poetic sentences.

It may be useful to begin this short essay with an elucidation of the terms ‘hymnic’ and ‘poetic’. In my definition a hymn is a cultic song in which the emphasis is on the praise of God. Often the hymn opens with a call to worship God followed by a foundation which consists of an enumeration of God’s deeds or qualities. Josef Kroll and, recently, Klaus Berger have rightly argued that it is not necessary to assume that every hymnic text has a factual cultic background. Authors of early-Christian texts, for example the author of Revelation, may have made use of the hymnic style and so have created a literary ‘hymn’. But also in that case the text has a cultic ring and will be associated by the reader with communal worship. In the course of my paper I will enter into the question of the extent to which the homages to God and Christ in the Revelation of John should be regarded as hymnic according to this definition.

As to the poetic character of these passages, it will be clear that in distinguishing poetry from prose texts we have to account for literary conventions. Broadly speaking, in the oriental biblical tradition the boundary between poetry and prose is less sharp

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than in texts from the classical Greek tradition, in which metre counts as a characteristic feature of poetry. A metrical pattern cannot be found in New Testament texts. Actually the classical distinction of long and short syllables, which is the base of metrical poetry, no longer exists in the Hellenistic colloquial language in which most of the texts of the New Testament were written. The rhythm of poetry in the Semitic tradition does not lie in the alternation of long and short syllables but can best be described as a rhythm of words and thoughts: short clauses round a central notion, repeated in corresponding clauses. As is well-known, we often find two parallel clauses (paral·lellismus membrorum). The so-called hymnic passages of Revelation can indeed be viewed as poetic passages in the Semitic and Old Testament literary tradition. My contention, however, is that this is true also of large parts of their context.

In other words, the theme of this volume does not prompt me to pay attention exclusively to the alleged hymnic passages, for in this way the possible poetic character of the context would be neglected. I will confine myself in another way—by focusing on the complete text of just two chapters of the book: Rev. 4 and 5.

I begin with 4,1-8 and will pay attention in particular to the language and the structuring of thoughts. In 4,1 and 2a the seer tells how he was called by the same voice that he had heard before (1,10) to ascend to heaven, and how thereupon he went into ecstasies.

In verse 2b there is a change of style. This part of the text (4,2b-8) deserves our special interest. Here the seer describes what was revealed to him in God’s throne hall. It may be noted that the prophetical author does not present a picture of God’s heavenly abode at a given moment in time. In a vision he has seen how it always is in heaven. What is highly characteristic of this passage is the almost total absence of verb forms. In v. 2b a continuous imperfect form is used (ἐκείνην) but in 3-8 we find mainly clauses without inflectional forms, alternated (in vv. 5 and 8) with the present tense.

Modern translations of this passage are somewhat misleading. In the New English Bible, for example, the present of verse 5 (ἐκπο­σεύονται) is rendered in the preterite tense: “From the throne went out flashes of lightning and peals of thunder.” Likewise in

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