Words at War:

*Liminality, revelation, and representation in apocalyptic literature*

Submitted by Rosemary Elizabeth Beckham, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 27th October, 2008.

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Signed: Rosemary Beckham

Date: 27th October, 2008
The focus of this study is revelation at the limits of communication. It considers the way in which (biblical) apocalyptic literature prominently figures the interconnection between liminality, revelation, and representation. The methodology asserts an indissoluble association between theology, philosophy and literature. As such it is interdisciplinary. A preliminary theory (and theology) of liminality interweaves the theological and philosophical contributions of, amongst others, Karl Barth, Graham Ward, Jürgen Moltmann and Jacques Derrida, thereby initiating a revised perspective on the constitution of literary apocalyptic text production and interpretation. Theorising the *limen* begins to describe the Trinitarian economy at work in Christian apocalyptic processing of scripture.

I begin with the idea that revelation (*apokalypsis*) is the experience of the *limen* itself (in a *coincidence* of opposites). Thus the *limen* (as an actively divine space) incorporates that which stands on both sides, in vertical and horizontal, linear and cyclical, spatial and temporal movements. I then propose that apocalyptic literature re-presents this complex economy in which the end is rehearsed simultaneously as limit, threshold, and rupture. Theologically, this complicates inter-relational notions of ‘apocalyptic’ and eschatology, and stimulates a debate on a metaphysics of violence in communication (between God, man and Creation). I conclude that, at the extreme limit of human understanding (where words fail), those with faith in God’s love are opened out to revelation in the apocalyptic textual performance of the liminal economy, and thus to hope and forgiveness.

Stressing the importance of reading apocalyptically, I begin to demonstrate the relationship between Christian-canonical narratives and the broader western literary canon, the critical process having invited an exploration of those literary characteristics (of tone, mode and genre) shared by (biblical, modern and postmodern) texts. An important principle in the literary analyses is the association between apocalyptic text production and hermeneutics. Christopher Rowland’s description of a ‘visionary mode’ explains how this process works. Thus the preliminary theory leads into a close reading of recent Russian and American works by Mikhail Bulgakov and Thomas Pynchon. These are compared to, and worked through, Mark’s and John’s gospels and the Book of Revelation. The interpretative approach widens the often self-limiting study of apocalyptic literature, and broadens theological debate on revelation. Thus it begins to show how the rhetoric of apocalyptic makes belief compelling.
# Contents

## Introduction

i. Revelation, liminality and representation 8  
ii. Propaedeutic 10  
iii. Aims and objectives 11  
iv. Outcomes 13  
v. Western views of apocalyptic 14  
vi. Methodological approach 18  
vii. Apocalyptic theology 22  
viii. Literary readings 23  
x. Structure 23  
x. Chapter summaries 24

## Part 1  
**Liminality, revelation, and representation**

### 1. Revelation and Representation: Representation, apocalyptic and a theory of liminality

1. Chapter summary 27  
2. Introduction 28  
3. Key definitions 33  
4. The language of theology 39  
5. Context for an advocacy of apocalyptic 47  
6. A theory of liminality 54

### 2. Liminality and reading apocalyptically

1. Chapter summary 59  
2. Introduction 59  
3. The ‘visionary mode’: participation, performance and proclamation 61  
4. Thresholds of revelation in through the work of Ernst Käsemann 71  
5. Imaginative participation and the unique crisis of early Christianity 79  
6. Performing the creative word in the *limen* 84  
7. Creation and correspondence 88  
8. The limits of language 97

### 3. The Flawed Medium of the Text

1. Introduction 98  
2. How do we know (God)? 100  
3. The crisis of representation 104  
4. The prison-house of language 106  
5. Derrida’s apocalyptic tone of all language and the problem of mediation 110  
6. Affect, crisis and representation 118
4. Protest and the dialectics of despair and hope in the work of Jürgen Moltmann

1. Introduction 143
2. The chapter in the context of this study 145
3. An overview of Moltmann’s theologies of hope and the cross 149
4. Mediating the text and the problem of dualism 154
5. Dualism and the primacy of hope 160
6. Dualistic argument and the inevitability of reversal 164
7. Dualism and appropriation 170
8. The double-bind of Judas and Jesus 173
9. The boy on the gallows 178
10. Conclusion 183

5. Inscribing Christ’s body: revealing radicalised faith and hope in the desiring community of God

1. Introduction 186
2. Theology of meaning and the sign 189
3. Desire and difference in the analogical account 193
4. The (Christian) desire for what is good 196
5. Desire and the liminal grammar of Christ’s body 198
6. Towards the sacred space of Christ’s body 201
7. A radical reading of displacement 203
8. Liminality and the (suffering) grammar of faith 207
9. A liminal reading of Christian tenets as tests of faith 217
10. Sacred space and participation: the cross and the scandal of Eucharist 227
11. Conclusion 234
Part 2
Words at War

6. Words at war: apocalyptic genre and mode
1. Introduction 236
2. The apocalyptic genre 239
3. The apocalyptic mode 251
4. Conclusion 252

7. Finding courage: Bulgakov’s apocalypse
1. Introduction 254
2. Eastern orthodox tradition 256
3. Apocalyptic and the Russian novel 279
4. A discourse on truth, lies and freedom 283
5. Overcoming the crisis of representation in re-presentation 287
6. Recognising the apocalyptic cues 291
7. Testing the Word in apocalypse 295
8. Sacrifice, witness and redemption 303
9. Apocalypse 310
10. Conclusion 314

8. Domesticating terror: paranoia, resistance and revelation
1. Introduction 316
2. ‘Seeing/not seeing’ and the desiring end: an overview of Thomas Pynchon 318
3. The narrative (of paranoia) 321
4. ‘Nuclear criticism’: war in the name of the Name 327
5. Pynchon, paranoia and the apocalyptic text 334
6. Against the way of the cross: travelling to the Magnificent Necropolis? 339
7. ‘Reading Mark’s gospel through an atheistic hermeneutic 347
8. Interference on the way to the tomb in Mark’s gospel 352
9. ‘Do not tell anyone’: the insider joke of Mark’s gospel 363
10. Conclusion 373

9. Epilogue
1. Overview 375
2. Seeking a methodology and thinking 376
3. Where next? 380

Appendix 1 386
Appendix 2 396
Appendix 3 407
Bibliography 410
Preface

The examiners’ request for changes to my original submission encouraged me to interrogate and rethink several of its original assertions via the comments and suggestions made during the *viva voce* and in their subsequent report. The resubmission of this PhD thesis reflects this effort. In order to ensure that I have done justice to the critique received, I have included an additional chapter that attempts to reflect more clearly how I view the work of Graham Ward as a supplement to that of Jürgen Moltmann. As a result, it is longer than the usual prescribed length. The university procedures allow some leeway with regard to length and as the additional work is a clear indication of my having taken their comments seriously, this has been accepted by the examiners.

Copyright Material

Appendix 1 consists of lecture notes of Professor Christopher Rowland of the University of Oxford and has been removed by the author in all but the University of Exeter full submission version here for copyright reasons.