

# **Some Initial Notes for A Comparison of Orthodox Worship and Mission Today, with the Eschatological Vision of Worship in the Book of Revelation**

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## **Similarities in Orthodox Worship, and Worship as Described in the Book of Revelation**

If one searches the Internet on the theme “Orthodox Worship and the Book of Revelation” one will find many entries that make clear the obvious, and often striking, features that are common to both Orthodox worship and to the many descriptions of worship found in the Book of Revelation. This should come as no surprise to anyone who participates regularly in Orthodox worship, and especially in the Divine Liturgy and Eucharist. The structure, focus, and many details of Orthodox worship are rooted in the revealed worship of the Old Testament. This worship was transformed with the coming of Christ, and has remained remarkably consistent throughout the centuries. Thus, the vision of heavenly worship in the Book of Revelation does not strike the Orthodox reader as fantastic or as simply imagery taken from the Old Testament accounts of worship in ancient Israel, as it might appear to some Protestants or to someone outside of the Christian faith.

Chapters 4 and 5, 8 and 15 present some close-ups and details of worship in the Book of Revelation, but an attentive reading of the whole book shows that all of the unfold within a liturgical context. The following are some of the features common to worship in the Orthodox Church and worship in the Book of Revelation: the throne, the altar, the seven lamp-stands and seven flames burning before the throne (between it and the altar),<sup>1</sup> the elders with crowns around the altar and throne (cf. the Orthodox hierarchical liturgy with many bishops), and the “angels” (literally “messengers”) entering and leaving the altar area.

The “Lamb, which appeared to have been slain,” standing in the midst of the throne and the elders, and having seven horns (Rev. 5:6), appears on the altar

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<sup>1</sup> In Orthodox worship the high place or throne of God is above and behind the altar. From this point sometimes the Bishop presides as the image of Christ in our midst. Regarding the seven golden lamp-stands and the one like a Son of Man (the risen Christ) standing among them (Rev. 1:13-14), the Orthodox Study Bible notes: “His position amidst the seven lamp-stands signifies His presence in the Church,” and of the lamp-stands it says that this image is a fusion of the great menorah of the temple with its seven lamps . . . and the golden lamp-stands of Solomon’s temple.” Further, “this reference prompts some scholars to suggest John was in the church in a liturgical setting during the Revelation” [*The Orthodox Study Bible, 2008, pg. 1713*]. In Rev. 4:5, we are told that there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which were the seven Spirits of God. If the churches are the lamp-stands it seems likely that they bear the fire and light of the Spirit’s presence, and therefore stand before the throne. The messages to the churches are each concluded with: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Later we shall suggest that the seven angels of the seven churches, to which the glorified “Son of Man” addresses His messages, Chapters 1-3, are one and the same as the seven angels which stand in the presence of God and blow the seven trumpets and pour out the seven cups which cause upheaval on the earth. It would seem that in the Church’s life, which *is* worship, heaven is present on earth, and in each act of worship we are united with worship in heaven. The Lord walking among the lampstands (churches) in Chapter 1, suggests the union of worship in heaven and on earth. [Regarding the “seven spirits” in Is. 11:1-2 and “seven eyes” of the Lord which range over the whole earth in Zech. 4:10, which are “seven lamps of fire burning before the throne” of God in the Book of Revelation (1:4): St. Gregory Palamas in Chapters 68 to 72 of *The Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, speaks of them as energies of God. He says in Chapter 68 “. . . the powers and energies of the divine Spirit are uncreated and because theology speaks of them in the plural they are indivisibly distinct from the one and altogether indivisible substance of the Spirit,” and in Chapter 69: “Since therefore the divine and divinizing illumination and grace is not the substance but the energy of God, for this reason it is treated not only in the singular but also in the plural. It is bestowed proportionately upon those who participate and, according to the capacity of those who receive it; it instills the divinizing radiance to a greater or lesser degree.” He does not address the number seven; this number seems without doubt to indicate fullness and completeness in all of the passages cited, as well as in the Book of Revelation as a whole).

in Orthodox worship as the bread of offering, which is called “The Lamb.” The bread for the Eucharist is stamped with the letters in Greek,<sup>2</sup> which stand for the words “Jesus Christ, Conquers.” In the Book of Revelation, the Lamb dominates the vision running from Chapters 5 to the end of the Book, and the saints and martyrs conquer the evil one (identified as the dragon, the devil, and Satan)<sup>3</sup> through the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:11). This theme of conquering Satan and death is very prominent in the Book of Revelation; for example, each of the seven letters to the churches ends with “to the one who conquers . . . .” The seven horns of the slaughtered Lamb represent the fullness of power of sacrificial love to overcome death and evil.<sup>4</sup>

Many other similarities between the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church and the worship described in the Book of Revelation could be mentioned. In particular, the uniting of worship on earth with heaven, and the connection of worship in heaven with earthly events, is a very pronounced feature of both Orthodox worship, and worship in the Book of Revelation. For example, the living creatures (or Cherubim) in the midst of the throne, representing all of God’s living creatures in heaven and on earth (Rev. 4:6-9) are part of the setting of Orthodox worship,<sup>5</sup> along with the “thrice-holy” hymn they chant day and night without ceasing (4:8) in the visions of the Book of Revelation (and also in other visions of heavenly worship described in the Bible).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Except in Georgia, where the inscription is in Georgian.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. 12:9; 20:2

<sup>4</sup> This essay does not address the question that might arise, as to how fully developed the liturgy of the church might have been at the time the Book of Revelation was written or what historical evidence there might be as to the deliberate use of the Book of Revelation in the development of the liturgical life of the Church in the century or two after Christ’s death and resurrection. Regarding the state of development of the Liturgy, one sees in the New Testament (for example, in Hebrews, Chapter 12), and in very early writings such as those of St. Ignatius of Antioch, the 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of Clement, and the First Apology of Justin Martyr, much carryover from the revealed worship of the Old Testament as well as its transformation in light of the revelation in Christ. It is my opinion that the basis structures of the Liturgy were rooted very early in the Church’s life.

<sup>5</sup> The cherubim are depicted often on fans used in the altar and in processions, and often in iconography (as they were in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple), especially in the vault above the throne and altar.

<sup>6</sup> See Isaiah 6:1-8 and Ezekiel, Chapter 1, which show a connection with, and reference to, the tabernacle revealed by God to Moses.

In the Divine Liturgy we acknowledge the presence of the Cherubim and Seraphim, with all the heavenly host, and join with them in the thrice holy hymn. The priest prays on behalf of all: “. . . and we thank You for this Liturgy which You have deigned to accept at our hands, though there stand by You thousands of archangels and hosts of angels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, who soar aloft, borne on their wings, singing the triumphant hymn, shouting proclaiming and saying: [here the people and choir join in] “Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord of Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are full of Your glory!” Thus, also, when the priest approaches the throne of God before the reading of the Scriptures, he bows before the throne and says “Blessed are you on the throne of the glory of Your kingdom, who sit upon the Cherubim, now, and ever [that is; in the past] and to ages of ages.” This last phrase “now, and ever, and to ages of ages,” used repeatedly in Orthodox worship, is comparable to the phrase “who is, and who was, and who is to come (or “comes”) used often in the Book of Revelation in reference to God and Christ.

God and Jesus Christ are described in the Book of Revelation as “the Alpha and Omega,” “the First and the Last,” “the Beginning and the End,” as well as “He who is, who was, and who comes.”<sup>7</sup> The “beginning” (*arche* in Greek – the shaping principle and origin of something) contains the goal (*telos* in Greek) or fruition of any object or living being. And vice-versa, the goal contains the beginning or origin. Thus, an acorn contains within itself its goal or end, which is a flourishing oak tree, and in the mature oak tree the acorn is produced. In our modern world we now know that, at a physical level, DNA functions in both of these ways.

The vision of the *Book of Revelation* presents the whole of reality and time, not only in its final goal or outcome, but in the process and dynamics at work within reality and time. The centre of the actions, which opens up the meaning of creation, human life, history and the process of salvation (and also the “meaninglessness” of their distortions) is the crucified and resurrected Lamb,

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<sup>7</sup> Rev. Chapter 5. Also 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12 and 8:1.

whose life and work unseals the closed book of the meaning of existence, both human and cosmic.<sup>8</sup>

The *Book of Revelation*, in keeping with the whole Biblical witness, presents an open door between heaven and the people of God on earth (Rev. 4:1ff.), an open door between time and eternity, with communication between created and uncreated. It also shows the significance of the realm “under the earth” and those who inhabit it, especially those martyred for “witness to the Word of God, and to the witness of Jesus.”<sup>9</sup> The Book of Revelation also includes the abyss or bottomless pit of evil within the dynamics unfolding in the history of salvation.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that the “Divine Liturgy” is united in heaven and on earth, and that earthly worship is, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has taught in many of his writings, ascension to the throne of God in heaven. This focus concerning union of heaven and earth in Orthodox worship may be confirmed from careful attention to the text and movement of the Divine Liturgy, from the profound theological studies that have been published on the meaning of the Divine Liturgy, from the experience of attentive celebration of the Divine Liturgy, and from participation in the Eucharist.

With this brief sketch of the striking similarities between Orthodox worship and the worship presented in the Book of Revelation, it is a bit of a puzzle, as has sometimes been noted, why the Orthodox Church world-wide does not include the reading of the Book of Revelation in her liturgical lectionary. However, I believe this omission in the services of the Church to be perfectly understandable from a theological perspective, in addition to the historical

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<sup>8</sup> In Rev. 1:4 “Him who is, who was, and who is to come” is distinguished from the seven spirits and Jesus Christ, in a “Trinitarian” blessing. See also 1:8, 10, 18; 21:5-6; 22:22 – they seem to be applicable to both God and Christ (the Lamb).

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Rev. 6:9ff. – the souls under the altar, who had been slain, who cry out to God and are answered – and 20:13: “Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them.”

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Rev. 20:1, and many other references. The modern world, dominated by a scientific, technological point of view of reality, is very “reductionist,” in refusing to take into account these spheres of reality.

reasons sometimes given for this omission.<sup>11</sup> The visions of the Book of Revelation (which in fact are one unified vision presented from four different standpoints)<sup>12</sup> form a living and moving whole of all reality and time, with a focus on the process, or “working out” of salvation and judgment through the presence of Christ in the fallen creation. The Book of Revelation, then, seems to be an “*architecture en mouvement*,” as Jacques Ellul puts it in the subtitle to the French edition of his work, *Apocalypse*.

Thus, the Book of Revelation is an icon of the whole of the Church’s life and witness within the whole creation, embracing time and eternity. In it we are confronted with, and recognize, the destiny of the whole creation and the mission in which we are engaged. If one were to be asked to explain the meaning of one’s life, where would one begin? One’s life is being lived even as one is being asked to explain it, and it includes a complex past. The meaning of one’s life also cannot be fully understood without knowing what the future may bring or the final destiny which awaits one. And lastly, the meaning of one’s life cannot be adequately

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. the late acceptance of the Book of Revelation by the whole Church, the difficulties of its subject matter, and thus fantastic theories based upon it.

<sup>12</sup> A clue as to one of the structuring principles by which the Book of Revelation is organized, are four visions characterized by the phrase *in the Spirit*. This phrase seems to present God’s perspective on the spiritual struggle going on earth, in which heaven and earth are united. These visions provide “behind the scenes” spiritual insight into the realities which underlie our visible world. They are equivalent to the visions and insights given to the prophets throughout Biblical history and show the impact of worship on earth, in heaven, and vice-versa; that is, on the judgment of the world and the coming of the New Creation. I hope to present this latter theme in a subsequent article.

The first vision runs from 1:9-3:22, and is a revelation of the Risen, Ascended, and Glorified Christ and His messages for seven churches in the province of “Asia” in the Roman Empire. The second vision runs from 4:1 all the way, with various symbolic “digressions,” to 16:21, and includes: the opening of a seven-sealed scroll by the slaughtered Lamb, standing before the throne of God, the sounding of seven trumpets, and the pouring out of seven cups on earth by seven angels who come out from the altar and throne of God, and cause great troubles on earth. These series of seven are interrupted by symbolic descriptions that appear to present the impact and spiritual upheavals caused by the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The third vision begins at 17:1 and runs to the end of chapter. It shows the demise and judgment of Babylon, which is human society organized outside of, and in opposition to God. The fourth vision, from 21:9ff. shows the consummation and victory of the people of God, as God’s new creation and society, the Holy Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

It should be noted that these visions are all part of one vision, thus providing four perspectives.

grasped, except in relation to the lives of many others and to its place in the whole of reality.

With this understanding of the message of the Book of Revelation, it makes sense that the Church does not primarily “read” and “listen to” the Book of Revelation, but that the Church is, *itself*, the “incarnation” of the message of the Book of Revelation. We add the caution that, as the letters to the seven churches make clear, the churches, as well as the world, come under the judgment of Christ when they depart from their witness to him, becoming identified with the fallen world. Conversely, I think that the Book of Revelation and other Scripture may indicate that the faithful witness of the churches affects the full revelation of Christ to the world, the separation of good from evil, and also the progress of this eschatological drama.

The purpose of this paper, is to set forth some initial notes in support of a thesis that the message of the *Book of Revelation* is repeatedly lived out in the worship of the Orthodox Church (in the Divine Liturgy, and in the offering of the Eucharist in particular), and in its presence and witness within a fallen world, connecting “heaven” and earth, and impacting all of reality. I contend that the Book of Revelation illumines the meaning and purpose and power of Orthodox worship and witness on earth, while the worship and witness of the Orthodox Church on earth illumines and embodies the message of the Book of Revelation. I am stressing the connection between worship on earth and worship in heaven, both in the Orthodox Church and the Book of Revelation. In a future article or articles, I hope to clarify the movement and action and development that takes place in the symbols and their meaning in the Book of Revelation. I also hope to show the impact on “the earth” and upon the outcome of all history, of the Church’s glorification of Christ on earth and in heaven, and its witness to Him on earth.

My contention is that the focus of the *Book of Revelation* is not the future, but rather the present, in which past and future are included. The power, presence, and the ultimate fulfillment of the work of Christ, accomplished once for all in His incarnation, death, resurrection, and enthronement and coming in glory, continue to be lived out in the Church’s worship and witness in the midst of the old creation. The following wording from the Eucharistic prayer in the Divine Liturgy, indicates the presence and power *now* of all of these aspects of the work

of Christ for the salvation of the world: *Remembering this saving commandment and all these things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Sitting on the right hand, the second and glorious Coming, Your own of Your own we offer you, on behalf of all and for all . . . .*

In the Orthodox Divine Liturgy and in the Orthodox celebration of the Great Feasts when we commemorate the life of Christ, His work of salvation is remembered not only as a past event, but also as a present reality and a future fulfillment in which we participate now, as many Orthodox spokespersons have repeatedly affirmed. In the Orthodox faith we are in communion with eternity, in the living, triune God; for example, we declare (in the present tense) at Holy Passover, “Christ *IS* Risen”, and we speak in a similar way; that is, in the present tense, in the celebration of other of the Great Feasts.

Christ’s defeat of the world’s rebellion against God, his overcoming of death, and His establishment of the New Creation, produces seismic upheavals within the old creation, which is passing away. The old creation has come to be organized in the midst of the shadow of death, oblivion of God and eternity, and worship of the creation rather than the Creator. The New Creation in Christ continues to be experienced and to work dynamically in the Church, in the struggles of her members to bear witness in faithfulness to the rule of Truth and Love in their lives.<sup>13</sup> The presence of Christ in the Church’s witness to Him represents a threat to the very foundations of the kingdoms of this world. These kingdoms resist submission to the King of kings and Lord of lords. The presence of the Kingdom of God is a judgment and torment to those whose lives have been invested in ways of thinking and acting that do not have reference to the living God. Thus, there is a fierce resistance to the witness to Christ, because this

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<sup>13</sup> In a future article I shall emphasize the double “witness to the Word of God and to the witness of Jesus,” the latter of which I believe is His offering of His blood for the world. I believe that this two-fold witness to the Word of God and to the witness of Jesus (to Truth and Love) are presented in many other ways in the Book of Revelation; for example, in the “trumpet” and “cup” series which cause upheaval on earth (and remind one of the Liturgy of the Word (Catechumens) and the Eucharistic Liturgy), as well as the two witnesses martyred (Chapter 11). It will be my argument that it is the Church’s faithful witness, united with Christ’s witness, which reveals the difference between the regimes of God and Satan and separates them, and that this revelation and separation constitutes in itself, at least a significant part of the judgment.



witness to Christ makes clear the futility of the "false gods" such as pleasure, power, and possessions, which people have made the purpose of their lives.

**Worship as Witness/Witness as Worship in the Book of Revelation:  
A Challenge to a Tendency on the Part of the Orthodox Church to  
Make Alliances with Worldly Political Powers and to Separate  
Worship from Mission**

Though there is much to ponder in this remarkable identity between the visions of "heavenly" worship in the Book of Revelation and worship in the Orthodox Church, I want to go beyond observations about this similarity or questions of what is the fullest and truest or most proper form of Christian worship or even the great significance of the mystical union of worship in heaven and on earth, in which the events of Christ's life and work are present to us and participated in by us, a theme often treated in Orthodox liturgical theology.

The whole cosmos and all of history – past, present and future – are involved in or affected by worship, according to the Book of Revelation. Worship on earth and in heaven are connected and have great effect on all of life on earth. Worship of the true God results in earthquakes and upheavals in the kingdoms of the world, which exist in rebellion against God. All issues of life, political, economic, sexual, death and victory over death, are manifestations of worship, true or false, with corresponding effects and implications according to the Book of Revelation. Thus, one may see in the beast the abuse of political power and masculinity, and its contrast with the sacrificial lamb who suffers for the salvation of the world; Babylon is perverted human society vs. the New Jerusalem, and the Prostitute may be seen as perversion of the feminine and of commerce and pleasure vs. the Bride of Christ. The second beast, who leads people to worship the image of the first beast and to give him obedience, represents, among other things, political religion, and propaganda.

In the letters to the seven churches by the glorified Jesus Christ, in chapters one to three of the Book of Revelation, betrayal of God and bowing to powers other than God, are seen primarily as spiritual adultery and idolatry. These are major themes throughout the Old Testament. And, as we read in 1<sup>st</sup>

Peter, “judgment begins with the household of God.”<sup>14</sup> In the Book of Revelation it is clear that the Church is accountable for her witness and faithfulness. Both persons and churches may become accommodated to the old world, and thus, lose their identity, coming under the same judgment as that of the fallen world, because they have become part of it.

There are two parallel and opposing “dispensations” in the Book of Revelation, one of falsehood, deception, the worship of what has been created, rebellion and expressed as anti- Christ. This dispensation is empty, prideful, lustful, and destined for destruction, because it is ultimately rooted in rebellion against “the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.” This dispensation represents perversion and misuse of all creation and other people. The other dispensation represents the living God and true faith

These two contrasting dispensations are spelled out in many details, the sum of which is to show that all of life is “religious” at its core. God is countered by the dragon,<sup>15</sup> while the Lamb is countered by the beast.<sup>16</sup> John, the true prophet, is mimicked by the second beast, the false prophet.<sup>17</sup> The Prostitute who rides on the beast is a perversion of the Bride of the Lamb.<sup>18</sup> The city of Babylon is destroyed and the New Jerusalem, the city of God, is revealed.<sup>19</sup> There are “those who dwell on earth,” clearly connected with the beast,<sup>20</sup> and there are “those who dwell in heaven,”<sup>21</sup> who are the believers. The former bear the mark of the beast on their forehead or hands; the latter have the seal of God on their foreheads.<sup>22</sup> God and Christ are characterized as the one “who is, who was and is

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<sup>14</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Pet. 4:17.

<sup>15</sup> Rev. 12:3. See, also, the whole chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Rev. 12:1. The beast has 7 heads, 10 horns, and 7 crowns like Satan – see the note immediately above.

<sup>17</sup> Rev. 13-17.

<sup>18</sup> Rev. Chapter 17 (the Prostitute); Rev. 19:7-9; 21:1-2; 21:9ff; 22:17 (the Bride of Christ).

<sup>19</sup> Rev. Chapter 18; Rev. Chapter 21 and 22:1-5.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Rev. 6:10

<sup>21</sup> Rev. 1:8 17:8

<sup>22</sup> “Those who dwell on earth” are to have the martyrs’ blood avenged on them (Rev. 5:10, go through a trial from which the faithful are protected (3:10), worship the beast (13:8) and so on. In

to come,” while the beast and the dragon are characterized by “was, and is not, and is to come and to go to perdition.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, God’s existence is real and true and never ending, but the kingdom of the evil one has no true reality or power, and has no future. More of these contrasts could be noted between the Kingdom of God and the false kingdom of the evil one.

In the Book of Revelation, as in the Bible as a whole, there is remarkable interaction between heaven and earth. The view of the world as godless, and the “oblivion of eternity,” which is the way of thinking for most human affairs on earth, is the opposite of the assumption of all the Biblical writings. In the latter, the interaction between heaven and earth is the overwhelming focus. In the Book of Revelation, it is the true worship of the Church on earth, its witness to the Truth and to the Love of God, its prayers, and its faithfulness to God in all spheres of life, which reveals the nature of evil as futility and emptiness, as deception and spiritual slavery. In so revealing the unbelieving world’s futility, the Church represents and brings judgment on the kingdoms of this world. By its faithfulness to the Truth and to the Way of life, in “witness to the word of God and to the witness of Jesus,” and by its very existence, the Church separates itself from or identifies itself in distinction from the world, and by this separation she reveals a kingdom not controlled by evil and godlessness. The revelation of truth and love and faithfulness in witnessing to them, even to death, separates good from evil, and at the same time the separation reveals truth and love in its fullness and evil in its futility and rebellion. The Book of Revelation is not a static presentation of reality, but a living and dynamic process of this separation and revelation taking place in history. The focus of the Book of Revelation is now, in the present, but it has been so in the past, and it continually is coming in the future. It is *telos* or fulfillment, its final goal, is also already known and at work.

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13:8 “those who dwell on earth” are characterized as “those whose names have not been written in the book of life.” “Those who dwell in heaven” (13:6) are in God’s dwelling place, are protected from the plagues, not because they have been taken off the earth in a rapture, but because the plagues are spiritual torment caused by “the witness to the word of God and to the witness of Jesus,” which shows those in rebellion of God the nature of what they have worshipped and done in rejecting God.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. 17:8: “The beast that you saw, was, is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition;” 20:1-10: the Dragon, who was, is confined to the bottomless pit, and is released after the 1000 years, but is defeated and cast into the lake of fire.

The message to the seven churches from the risen and exalted Son of Man (Chapters 1-3) is to maintain their witness to the word of God; that is, to the Truth, and to the witness of Jesus; that is, to sacrificial Love, which brings about turmoil and upheaval in the old creation and in the kingdom of Satan and the beast. The worship of the Church, in re-orienting all toward the living God, the Creator and Redeemer, is a total way of life, not confined to liturgical services. There are many references to a two-fold witness in the Book of Revelation, as has been noted. This two-fold witness was required in the teaching of Moses for the conviction of an accused person. This two-fold witness is especially developed in the Book of Revelation in the sounding of the seven trumpets (recalling the seven trumpets in the seven-fold marches of Joshua and Israelites around Jericho, which led to the fall of Jericho), and the seven bowls (more accurately, broad cups), being poured out on the kingdom of the beast.

The seven angels to whom the letters of the risen Lord, the One like the Son of Man, are written in Chapters 1 to 3, re-appear as those who stand in the presence of the Lord in the temple.<sup>24</sup> It is they who are given the seven trumpets to blow, sounding of which causes increasing turmoil on the earth, and it is they to whom are given the seven broad cups, which are poured out on the earth. (It is later said the Lord has given the Prostitute blood to drink, because she has devoured the blood of witnesses to Christ).<sup>25</sup> Remarkably, these trumpet and cup series correspond to two parts of the Divine Liturgy; that is, the Liturgy of the Catechumens (or the Liturgy of the Word, in which the Epistle and Gospel are read), and the Eucharistic liturgy. One of these seven angels also takes John in the spirit into the wilderness to show him the true nature of Babylon, and her complete fall and destruction, and also takes him “in the Spirit” to a high mountain, to see the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, prepared as a Bride for her husband, and the consummation of all things.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it seems to me that it is the witness of the churches in their liturgical worship, and in their life in the world, which causes the judgment and upheaval within the fallen world and its reaction to this witness, which in turn is further revelation of the

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<sup>24</sup> Rev. 8:1; 15:1.

<sup>25</sup> Rev. 17:6; 18:6.

<sup>26</sup> Rev. 17:1-3; Rev. 21:9-10.

emptiness and powerlessness and futility of the fallen world in its opposition to God.

It may seem, at first mention, to be an unconvincing claim to link the seven angels of the seven churches, to which the risen and glorified Christ addresses his exhortations, to the seven angels later mentioned as standing in the presence of God and carrying out the trumpet and cup series of upheavals on the world. However this pattern regarding an initial brief mention of symbols or events earlier in the Book, and then their being clarified or developed later in the Book, as part of a movement and fulfilled, is very pronounced in the Book of Revelation.<sup>27</sup>

There is a dynamic unfolding of activity and meaning in the Book of Revelation, showing how the fallen world is being judged by the witness of the Church and in her worship of God and its expression in daily life. Gradually the worldly kingdoms under the sway of Satan manifest their true identity in their reaction the Church's "witness to the Word of God and to the witness of Jesus," and thereby condemn themselves. The "witness of Jesus," so often mentioned in the Book of Revelation, usually in conjunction with "witness to the Word of God," would appear to be witness to the point of shedding of blood, in sacrificial love for mankind and in faithfulness to the Truth.<sup>28</sup>

## Summary

Far from teaching us to forsake the present and to be fascinated with predicting the details of the end of history, the Book of Revelation is about the present, about the dynamic and struggle within human history, which has its cause and meaning and outcome in Jesus Christ. The Book is about the revelation of Jesus Christ and the meaning of His coming. This revelation of Christ, continued in the Church's worship and witness, *is* the judgment of evil in its various manifestations. In a sense the satanic regime judges and destroys itself in its senseless and brutal opposition to Truth and Love. The revelation shows the

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<sup>27</sup> I shall develop this very prominent theme in detail in a future article.

<sup>28</sup> See Chapter 19 where the white robe of the rider on the white horse (identified as the Word of God) is dipped in blood, symbolizing the triumphant passage of the Word of God through crucifixion and death.

true nature of God and the wonder of salvation, while at the same time manifesting the true nature and ultimate futility and ugliness of evil. The **revelation separates** the forces of good and evil; at the same time, the **separation reveals** their true nature.

The Book of Revelation is the music of the Gospel in another key. The four Gospels are like a close-up of Jesus Christ and His work of salvation, especially in relation to God's chosen people. The Book of Revelation is like the camera drawing back for a panoramic view of the significance and outcome at a cosmic level, of the life and teaching, death and resurrection, enthronement and coming in glory of Jesus Christ.

Thus, the faithfulness of the churches to the truth and salvation in Christ is crucial for the course of history. In proportion to the faithfulness and fullness of their witness, so is the revelation and judgment of evil. And if the churches flounder in faithfulness to this witness, they come under the same judgment as evil does, and come to share the same destiny as that of the fallen world separated from God.

The Book of Revelation presents the core dynamic of the whole scope of the created world and human history, with both its meaning and its meaninglessness, and judgment or outcome. So also it presents the cosmic scope and "spatial" character of reality – which includes heaven and earth and realms under the earth, and even the abyss; it also describes the upheavals and "earthquakes" created by the Gospel in the old creation; and it shows the impact and outcome of the new creation having been planted within the fallen creation by the coming and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Book it is made clear that a new creation has begun in Christ, and that the judgment of the old creation has taken place in His death and resurrection as well. There are constant earthquakes and upheavals due to the presence of the new creation in Christ, with its victory over death and over death's hold on human activities and goals, by bearing witness to the Truth and Love of God, especially in defiance of death itself operating within the old creation, which is governed by the principle of death.

Worship and “witness to the Word of God, and to “the witness of Jesus” are the cause of the upheavals and opposition to the Gospel within the fallen world, including within our own lives and within the churches, which latter we participate in to our own judgment or salvation. It is an almost universal assumption that the Book of Revelation was written to encourage beleaguered and persecuted Christians, but while this view may be partly true, I believe that it is more accurate to understand the Book of Revelation as a confident and triumphant book, showing the power of the Gospel in the ultimate re-creation and judgment of the world.

It is my conviction that the Book of Revelation shows that proclamation of the truth (the seven trumpets), and witness to the blood of Jesus Christ (and of martyrs’ blood linked to it)<sup>29</sup> are the source of the plagues and upheavals and torments on earth. All the mentions of blood, which are many in this book, can be shown to be the blood of Christ and that of the martyrs<sup>30</sup> (“witnesses” to Truth and Love). This blood of witness to Truth and Love is what manifests the lie that human life can have any meaning apart from communion with God and other human beings. This shedding of innocent blood is the exposure of idolatry and of all the false commitments and worship of created things and alternative purposes in life to which human beings give themselves. It is the witness of the blood of innocent and righteous victims throughout history, united with, and fulfilled in the blood of Jesus Christ, which shouts out the emptiness and futility and ugliness and pride of human rebellion against God, and bears witness to its ultimate end. This witness to the emptiness of evil, which latter is founded upon the lies and temptations of the evil one, threatens the whole structure of godlessness upon which the fallen world is based, and infuriates those who see in it the collapse of the whole reason for their existence. Truth and Love are the essential judgment and torment of those who have given themselves to worship of idols and to indulgence in self-love, and to the abuse of creation and other human beings, which have been given existence through the unfathomable love of God.

Because of tendencies in the Orthodox churches at various times and in various places to isolate the “liturgical” life of the Church from witness, rather

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<sup>29</sup> And all innocent blood which has ever been shed.

<sup>30</sup> This theme will be developed in a future article.

than seeing them as an inseparable whole, with the offering “of ourselves and one another and our whole life to God” as we say in the Divine Liturgy a number of times, we have to resort to use two words in English – worship and witness – to speak of the Church’s life. Also, in other societies historically, where the culture has been deeply penetrated by the faith, there has still been this isolation of worship from much that we do in the rest of our lives.

Also, because of the very close association of church and state at certain times and places in Orthodox history, there has been a diminution of the eschatological focus of the Christian faith, that there can be no ultimate “peace” or arrangement with the political powers of the world until all submit to the Lordship of Christ.

Finally, there has been a strong tendency to identify the Orthodox Church with ethnic groups, instead of emphasizing that all the peoples and nations are to be encouraged to bring their wealth into the New Jerusalem and into the unity of differences in Christ, not for the glory of human achievements, but for the glory of God.

Perhaps thoughtful study, discussion, and reflection on the message of the Book of Revelation could stimulate a fresh approach to the “worship/witness” of the Orthodox Church in the context of the present realities of world Orthodoxy among the nations today.

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