

## THE CONCEPT OF “CONQUEROR” IN THE LETTERS OF THE APOCALYPSE (chapters 2-3)

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examines the notion of “conqueror” as found in Revelation 2-3, specifically at the end of the seven letters addressed by the Saviour of the churches of Asia Minor. An exegetical investigation was carried out, following the immediate context in which the term is used, but also the general message of the letter. A central place is occupied by the promises made to the victor and which give us a broad perspective on the relationship that Christ has with His Church. These promises are an integral part of the body of each letter, an indispensable and motivating rhetorical element.

**Keywords:** spiritual victorious, reward, immortality, participation, protection, authority, perfection, royalty, stability, Revelation, the letters of Revelation, Revelation 2-3.

In the volume *Faithful to the End: An Introduction to Hebrews Through Revelation*, Terry L. Wilder, J. Daryl Charles and Kendell Easley<sup>2</sup> suggest that the general epistles (from Hebrews to Revelation) are true calls to fidelity to God. Placed in the final part of the New Testament, these letters are intended to be a last encouragement to the Church, regardless of the age, it is going through. The battle for spirituality will always be life and death, the prospect of victory is imperative. If after the ascension of Christ, the situation of the Church worsened, His promises were so important, precisely because they offered consolation and support. Hence the favorite theme of suffering in all these epistles, but especially in Revelation. Keeping the faith becomes more and more difficult, and the challenges more and more intimidating. Faith communities go

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through difficult exams, and it seems that only a minority can go all the way. Perhaps nowhere is this clash seen - in an eloquent and concise manner - until the end of the seven letters of Revelation. One by one, the seven churches in Asia Minor receive promises from the Savior that direct the hearts of believers to the future reality.

The seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3 are anticipated - including in terms of content - by the first chapter of the book. From the first verses, Christ is present during the churches, which appear in the text through the metaphor of the “candlestick” – 1.12-13,20). According to Michael J. Gorman, the effects of this presence are *security*, *hope* and *discipleship*, and the seven messages develop these paradigms in a creative way.<sup>3</sup> In the imminence (or even in the midst of) persecution, the Christian communities of Asia Minor needed the victorious image of Christ, the One who overcame death.

If the author shared with his recipients “suffering and kingdom and patient” (Rev 1,9), then it means that these are the three great subjects of the first century. In a classic work, Thomas L. Torrance rightly observed that the three ingredients - *tribulation*, *kingdom*, *patience* - represent the unanimous experience of Christians in the apostolic age, elements that mature them in the faith. The trials to which Christ’s followers were exposed, the prospect of God’s kingdom, and the implicit patience they had to show, were all an integral part of their lives. From its inception, the Church has inevitably interacted with these three dimensions.

As we know, “the first audiences of Revelation faced a wide range of challenges in their local settings”<sup>4</sup>, “beyond these, there would have been the everyday concerns of providing for their families, dealing with disappointment, wrestling with doubt concerning the choices they had made in casting in their lot with the Christ-followers, and the like.”<sup>5</sup>

Precisely because of this, in their essence, the letters address two realities: “the reality of various kinds of persecution, and the strong temptation to accommodate, with accommodation perhaps being seen by some as the way to avoid or stop the persecution. The seven messages tell us that there is a wide spectrum within the churches, from the highly accommodating to those who are persecuted - undoubtedly for not accommodating.”<sup>6</sup> In the end, there was

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<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 123-124.

<sup>4</sup> David A. de Silva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Context, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 811.

<sup>5</sup> David A. de Silva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Context, Methods & Ministry Formation*, 811.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 131.

only one of two things: either an opposition to the world, which often led to martyrdom; either accommodation to world standards, or, implicitly, apostasy. The seven messages sent to the churches of Asia Minor are eloquent proof of this.

Under these circumstances, it was very encouraging that each letter ended with a promise made by Christ (2,7; 2,11; 2,17; 2,26-27; 3,5; 3,12; 3,21). This promise is addressed to “the one who will win”, even if sometimes victory involved martyrdom. The Lord of the Church relies on several daring believers, ready to bear the battle of faith and carry the banner of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Greek term that describes the notion of “victory” is νικάω. It indicates a victory, resulting from a clash of forces. The image of the victor, as it was applied in the ancient world, we find in three registers: (1) *Military*: “Soldiers conquer on the battlefield by strength, courage, weaponry, and tactics... Temples and coins at Ephesus, Pergamum, Laodicea, and other cities depicted the emperors Augustus, Titus, and Domitian in military dress receiving victory wreaths, holding trophies, or attended by Nikē, who personified victory”<sup>7</sup>; (2) *Athletics*: “The verb nikan was used for victory in athletic and musical competitions. Such contests were held during festivals honouring deities like Artemis at Ephesus and at festivals for the emperors.

At Ephesus, the games inaugurated during Domitian’s reign provided opportunities for athletes to conquer”<sup>8</sup>; (3) *Faithfulness*: “Those who remained true to their convictions in the face of opposition also “conquered.” Such a victory is achieved not by inflicting violence, but by enduring it. The Maccabean martyrs, who endured torture and were executed for their faithfulness to Jewish law, were compared to athletes (4 Macc 1,11; cf. 6,10; 9,30; 11,20; 17,15) and soldiers (7,4; 16,14; 17,24). In John 16,33, Christ conquers a world dominated by evil through his death and resurrection, since these actions are a triumph for divine love and life. By remaining faithful to Christ, his followers conquer the world in which hatred and untruth operate (1 John 2,13-14; 4,5; 5,4-5).”<sup>9</sup>

According to Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida<sup>10</sup>, νικάω is most eloquently used in 1John 5,4: “for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” Again, the Church’s struggle is placed in direct relation to the world, in its pagan sense, as we should understand including the statements with which each letter ends.

<sup>7</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2014), 265.

<sup>8</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 265.

<sup>9</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 265.

<sup>10</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, vol. I (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 500.

The victors mentioned in the text can be associated, in fact, with the earthly destiny of Christ. Everyone must fight like the Son of God, who did not back down before any challenge, and the solemnity of this image is confirmed even in the book of Revelation (3,21; 5,5; 17,12-14). And so, as Christ was ascended to heaven and received the place he had before, His conquerors will receive extraordinary rewards. Likewise, the promises made to the victors attest to the unique role that the Church had to play on the stage of antiquity. Therefore, “through this earthly historical Church that the Lamb of God gains a purchase upon history and exerts His redeeming power among the nations.”<sup>11</sup>

As we will see, all these rewards are related to the future, that is, they are - in their essence - eschatological. In the tumult of history, the Church was called to bind all her hopes to the age to come to the time when evil will be eradicated, and Christ will reign forever. Moreover, each church was promised something special, and the metaphors used were always related to the context of that community. As always, Christ speaks here in the language of the recipients, appealing to common elements, which they can understand without difficulty.

### Participation’s reward

The first letter, to the Church at Ephesus<sup>12</sup>, ends with the words: “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (2,7). As we see, the promise made to this church has three coordinates. The first refers to *the action* itself, in this case a fundamental need: food. The second indicates *the source* of this spiritual food: the “tree of life”. The third has to do with *the location* of the tree of life in the “heaven of God.” We can also interpret these coordinates with the following questions: “What does the winner receive? Access to spiritual food”; “Where does this food come from? From the tree of life”; “Where is this tree?” In God’s heaven.”

In His divine care, Christ solves the greatest need of the soul: “I will give the right to eat” (δώσω αὐτῷ φαγεῖν). The promise is stated in two verbs: δίδωμι (in the future) and ἐσθίω (in the aorist). The verb δίδωμι refers “to grant someone the opportunity or occasion to do something”<sup>13</sup>; and ἐσθίω refers to

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> For details of isagogy, see: L. M. McDonald, “Ephesus”, in Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 318-321.

<sup>13</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 163.

"to consume food, usually solids, but also liquids."<sup>14</sup> Hungry with each generation that is born, the soul will constantly seek to be saturated with the spiritual. His food is not of this world, but of the "tree of life" (τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς), which must relate to that of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2.9). "Perhaps the OT tree of life was chosen as emblematic of Christian reward because a tree image was long associated either with the goddess Artemis or with Ephesus, where the great Artemis temple flourished. What paganism promised only Christianity as the fulfilment of OT hopes could deliver."<sup>15</sup>

In the New Testament, the "tree of life" appears only in the book of Revelation. In addition to the passage studied, we find it in two other places: 22,14 ("Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city") and 22,19 ("if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll"). In general, *the tree of life* "is a symbol of God's provision for all of humanity's needs in a life lived in obedience to and intimate fellowship with him."<sup>16</sup>

The tree of life is found in "God's paradise," an expression of a deep theological and spiritual charge.<sup>17</sup> There are only two previous occurrences of the word παραδεισος in the New Testament: Luke 23.43: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" and 2Corinthians 12.4: "was caught up to paradise...". In the first situation we have *the promise* of Jesus made to one of the two robbers crucified with Him; in the second we have *the description*, in the third person of the Holy Apostle Paul about a revelation that he had. In the case of Jesus' promise, paradise is described as a metaphysical reality, and His presence in this place is certain ("you will be with Me ..."). In Paul's experience, the statement suggests the same overwhelming presence of God, a context in which the apostle sees things that cannot be told.

Paradise is, therefore, the place where God is and where man is expected in his eschatological destiny. This place is referred to - by the expression "Abraham's breast" - and in the parable of the ruthless rich man, spoken by the Saviour precisely to highlight the eternal destiny of men (Luke 16.19-31).

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<sup>14</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 247.

<sup>15</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 442.

<sup>16</sup> Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), Chapter 3, Section 6, para 18.

<sup>17</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "Heaven(s), Dome/Firmament, Paradise", in Donald E. Gowan (ed.), *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 200-202

Therefore, the three components - the verb "to eat" and the indication "tree of life" and "heaven of God" - plastically suggest the whole paradisiacal reality. In this way, "the promise is a narrative, like a summary, of hope, as it is known in Old Testament and apocalyptic culture, about the eschatological restoration of paradise and people's access to the fruit of the tree of life. At the same time, however, the promise shows that the hope of men materializes exclusively in Christ, the One who, once presented in a prototypical way, respectively in the symbol of the tree of life, in heaven, is now actually present inside His Church, offering a new promise to those who will win, namely that it will make them partakers in the fulfilment of the latter."<sup>18</sup>

The reference to paradise can also be related to a contextual element. "A possible local reference involves the grove Ortygia outside of Ephesus, thought to be the traditional birthplace of Artemis. This sacred grove, called a *paradeisos*, still drew pilgrims in the first century. The paradise available to the worshipers of Artemis paled in comparison to the coming paradise of God."<sup>19</sup> Such an association would have better highlighted the uniqueness of the heavenly paradise.

Promises such as those transmitted to the Church at Ephesus have precedents in Jewish literature. "The same end-time hope is referred to with virtually identical language in several early Jewish texts (Test. Levi 18:10-11; Pss. Sol. 14:2-3, 10; 4 Ezra 8:52; 2 En. 8:3-7 [cf. also 1 En. 25:4ff.; 3 Enoch 23:18; 4 Ezra 2:12; Apocalypse of Moses 28:2-4; Odes Sol. 20:7)."<sup>20</sup> All these texts speak of the hope of the Jews - from different generations - for the future reward. The idea of reward is something deeply rooted in the human heart, and this cannot be accidental. Precisely because of this, in a concrete way, Christ promises the victor access to the intimate space of His presence. This participation surpasses any other earthly reward because it is, in the end, the Christian's longing.

### Immortality's reward

The second letter, the one to the Church in Smyrna, ends with the words: "The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death" (2,11), "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give your life as your victor's crown" (2,10). We can consider the expression "I will give your life as your victor's crown" an anticipation of the promise of protection: "will not be hurt at all by the second death".

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<sup>18</sup> Ioannis Skiadaresis, *Apocalipsa Sfântului Ioan Teologul: cele dintâi și cele de pe urmă*, trad. Nicolae Burăș (Iași: Doxologia), 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002), 67.

<sup>20</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 440.

The victor is promised “the victor’s crown” (στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς), phrase that still appears in James 1,12: “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him”. According to Craig R. Koester<sup>21</sup>, the notion of “crown” (στέφανος) it was used in the ancient world in three fields: *athletics*<sup>22</sup>, *military service*<sup>23</sup> and *public service*<sup>24</sup>. In sports, because “each competition was dedicated to a certain deity, “the victor’ wreaths connoted sacred honour. Metaphorically, philosopher urged people to overcome their passions and attain a wreath of virtue.”<sup>25</sup> In the military field, because “wreaths were worn by those who triumphed in battle. The goddess Nikē (or Victory) was associated with the wreath, and the goddess Roma was depicted giving wreaths to emperors in military dress.”<sup>26</sup> And finally, in the field of public recognition, “benefactors and others who performed civic service were publicly honored with wreaths... Recipients were commended for faithfulness, integrity and generosity.”<sup>27</sup> These forms of recognition — sporting, military and civic — are eloquent in understanding the eschatological reward that Christ will give to the church from Smyrna.

The promised eternal life is associated in the text with immortality, that is, the graduation of the Christian to go through the second death. “A connection between death and Smyrna existed in the ancient world. Its name was identical to the Greek word for the sweet-smelling spice in which dead bodies were wrapped for embalming (e.g., that of Jesus; John 19:39). Several mourning myths became associated with the city, particularly that of Niobe, the Greek mythological figure whose tear-stained face was thought to be etched in the

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<sup>21</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 277-278.

<sup>22</sup> For details of isagogy, see: J. R. C. Couslan, “Athletics”, in Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 140-142.

<sup>23</sup> For details of isagogy, see: G. L. Thompson, “Roman Military”, in Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 991-995.

<sup>24</sup> For details of isagogy, see: D. W. J. Gill, “Roman Political System”, in Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 995-999.

<sup>25</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 277. Similarly, St. Paul the Apostle describes the whole life of faith in terms of a sporting competition (2Tim 4,8; 1Cor 9,25). St. Peter the Apostle urges its recipients in the same terms (1Pet 5,4), but also St. James the Apostle (1,12).

<sup>26</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 277. “Revelation pictures the persecution of the church as a war in which Christians are combatants, whose weaponry is they witness to truth (11,7; 12,11; 13,7). For them, wreaths are like the honours given to soldiers.”

<sup>27</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 277-278.

marble of nearby Mount Sipylus. A city associated with suffering produced a church known for its suffering."<sup>28</sup>

In the context of the whole book, the notion of "second death" can be associated with Revelation 20,4-6. "Christ's resurrection gave him power over the entire sphere of death (he now has "the keys of death and Hades," 1:18b), which enabled him both to bind the satanic prince of that realm and to protect his own people from its ultimate harmful effects. And this thought from 1:18b is the basis, not only for "not fearing" (v 10), but also for the concluding assertion that overcomers "will not be harmed by the second death" (2:11b), since the description in 1:18a introduces this very letter (2:8). Those who do suffer the "second death" will not participate in the resurrection of the saints or in the life of the new world to come, but will experience unending punishment."<sup>29</sup> Finally, we can consider this redemption of the second death "overcoming the moment of disobedience of which the first men were guilty (Gen. 3,3-11)."<sup>30</sup>

These two promises (the crown of life and redemption from the second death) are in fact one. Both have to do with life in its ultimate dimension, an eternal life that overcomes death and all its power. The everlasting dream of men - immortality - becomes reality in the reputed victory of Christ on the cross. No trial from without, no disturbance from within, and not even martyrdom can destroy Christian hope in eternal life. He who overcomes all this by faith, who remains steadfast no matter what the circumstances, shares with himself Christ his own eternity. It is a complete blessing that only God can distribute to people.

### **Protection's reward**

The third letter, the one to the Church in Pergamum, ends with the words: "To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it" (2,17).

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<sup>28</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 453.

<sup>30</sup> Ioannis Skiadaresis, *Apocalipsa Sfântului Ioan Teologul: cele dintâi și cele de pe urmă*, 99. "Following the same trajectory and aiming to highlight the ways of thinking and expression of the author of Revelation, we are able to assume that the scenes we refer to below were narrated by St. John the Theologian under the influence of the narrative of the first chapters of Genesis, in the content of which is exposed, on the one hand, the tragedy of the fall of the first people and, on the other hand, the feeling of compassion of God towards them."

The Saviour’s promise contains two elements: “the hidden manna” (τοῦ μάννα τοῦ κεκρυμμένου) and “a white stone” (ψῆφον λευκήν). The first element refers to the food providentially offered by God to the Jews who travelled through the wilderness. In their immediate context, this food was vital, saving their lives and bringing them to Canaan. What was then a necessity for the body, here is a necessity for the soul. Even more, this spiritual food is promised for the afterlife, in a fullness that cannot be reached by anything. G. K. Beale<sup>31</sup> suggests a connection between the reference to the “hidden hand” and the promise made to the Church in Ephesus: “I will feed them from the tree of life” (2:7). Looking at things synergistically, the two churches are promised unconditional access to eschatological joy, understood in the Eucharistic key.

In addition to Old Testament references, non-canonical Jewish literature also provides valuable details. “One Jewish tradition claims that Jeremiah rescued the ark with its pot of manna and hid them in a cave on Mount Nebo until God should rather his people (2 Macc. 2:4–8). Another states that an angel hid these sacred temple objects in the earth and is to guard them until the end times (2 Bar. 6:8). Jesus uses the manna imagery in his teaching: He himself is the true bread of God and whoever eats of him will live forever in the age to come (John 6:30–58). During his earthly ministry, Jesus’ teaching is largely hidden from the Jews (Matt. 13:34–35) and from his disciples (Luke 18:34). Another idea that was apparently current in the late first century is that the messianic age would be inaugurated by restoring the gift of manna (cf. 2 Bar. 29:8).”<sup>32</sup> Observing these occurrences - scriptural and non-scriptural - it becomes obvious that the manna refers to the eschatological feast, to that permanent contemplation of Christ.

The victor is also promised “a white stone with a new name written on it” (τὴν ψῆφον ὄνομα καινὸν γεγραμμένον). “A white stone had various uses in antiquity: a token of admission, a voting piece, a symbol of victory, a Christian amulet, or something used in an initiation into the service of Asclepius. White stones were also the writing surface for official edicts. One such relevant decree was issued in 9 B.C. by Paulus Fabius Maximus, the governor of Asia. This edict, confirmed by the provincial league, decreed that Augustus’s birthday should be made an official holiday in Asia as well as to mark the beginning of the municipal new year. It was inscribed in Latin and Greek on a white stone and set up in the imperial cult temple in Pergamum. The decree was apparently distributed throughout the province because copies have been found in five Asian cities.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 463.

<sup>32</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, 75.

As with other letters, the cultural context plays an important role. Believers in Pergamum were familiar with the notion of white stone, which always had a precise meaning. Sometimes, the possession of such a stone could decide a person's access to a certain setting. However, the marking of this stone with a new name makes it even more special. "The internal movement of Revelation, however, makes it probable that the new name is Christ's name, which is written on the stone as his new name is written on the believer (cf. Rev 3,12)."<sup>34</sup> We are justified in believing that no other name can be newer and more important than the name of Christ. On the other hand, living their whole lives in communion with Christ, there would be no greater joy than to bear His name.<sup>35</sup>

Taken together, these details suggest the idea of protection. God, who has guarded Christians throughout his earthly life, continues to protect them in the new eschatological reality. The Conqueror will be rewarded with the very comforting presence of the Saviour, in full communion with Him. Nothing can disturb this reality which has to do with the sovereignty of Christ. If He remains in control of things and history is fully subordinate to Him, the Christian has nothing to fear.

### **Authority's reward**

The fourth letter, the one to the Church of Thyatira, ends with the words: "To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations - that one 'will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery' - just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give that one the morning star" (2,26-28).

The Saviour's promises consist of two powerful statements: "I will give authority over the nations" and "I will also give that one the morning star". The conqueror is promised, first, "authority over the nations," just as Christ received authority from God the Father. For the notion of "authority" we have ἐξουσία, that refers to "the right to control or govern over something / someone."<sup>36</sup> This

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<sup>34</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 290.

<sup>35</sup> For details on the notion of "name" in the Bible, see: John Goldingay, "Name", in Donald E. Gowan (ed.), *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 337-340.

<sup>36</sup> Johannes P. Louw, Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 475. We have an expressive use of the word in Luke 19,17: "Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge (ἐξουσία) of ten cities."

authority was to be exercised over the "nations" for which the word is used ἔθνος, always in the plural and referring to "those who do not belong to the Jewish or Christian faith."<sup>37</sup> The dominion that Christ promises to the conqueror is over the nations that - over the centuries - have opposed God's revelation to Israel and, by extension, to the Church. Just as Old Testament prophets and psalmists spoke words of judgment against unbelieving nations, the victors of the Church of Thyatira will judge this attitude rebellious and defiant.<sup>38</sup> The framework in which this mastery will be fully realized is described at the end of the book of Revelation. "That rule is finally established when the rider on the white horse strikes down the nations with his iron sceptre (19:15). The victors, seen as the armies of heaven riding on white horses (19:14), will begin to exercise their rule during the thousand years (20:4)."<sup>39</sup>

Second, the Saviour offers the conqueror "the morning star," an expression that can be an analogy to Balaam's third oracle ("A star will come out of Jacob - Num. 24,17). "The image of a star from Jacob became a stock messianic expression in intertestamental Judaism. The messianic leader of the Jewish revolt in A.D. 132 was given the name Bar Kokhba, which is translated "son of the star." Second Peter 1:19 is another New Testament text that links Jesus with this metaphor: "And the morning star rises in your hearts." In antiquity, the planet Venus was linked to the morning star. From Babylonian times, it was a symbol of rule. The Roman legions carried Venus's zodiac sign, the bull, on their standards. Therefore, the church and the empire had conflicting notions about what the morning star heralded for the world."<sup>40</sup>

The meaning that the Old Testament suggests to us on the morning star must be supplemented with the proper Christological meaning. Therefore, the star "is representative (by metonym) as messianic rule, as is evident from its use in 22,16 as a further explanation of the Isa. 11,1 prophecy, which has begun to be fulfilled in Jesus. This meaning of the image is confirmed from Num. 24,14-20."<sup>41</sup> In the light of this interpretation, we can consider that the victor receives - through the metaphor of the "star" Christ himself, His beneficent presence and the grace that flows from this communion.

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<sup>37</sup> Johannes P. Louw, Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 126. Christianity took the Jewish use of the word and attributed it to those who did not assume the faith, thus being synonymous with "pagan".

<sup>38</sup> Exegetes usually put this expression in connection with Psalm 2: 8-9, an Old Testament fragment that is interpreted here in a Christological key. What David prophesied hundreds of years before will be fulfilled in the last days in Christ and in the future in the eternal destiny of His followers.

<sup>39</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, 80.

<sup>41</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 485.

The two constituent elements, the rule of nations and the reception of the morning star, are complementary. Both suggest the idea of a special authority reserved by Christ to those who will win the battle for morality and testimony. They will be placed in a unique position, they will enjoy the privileges held by the Saviour himself, and they will share states of mind of unprecedented intensity. Undoubtedly, we have here one of the brightest rewards ever promised.

### Perfection's reward

The fifth letter, the one to the Church of Sardis, ends with the words: "The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels" (3,5). There are three promised rewards here: dressing in white, writing the name in the book of life, and confessing the name of the victor before the angels. All these elements are part of a unique register of biblical literature, which greatly increases the hermeneutic difficulty.

First, the victor is promised that "will be dressed in white" (περιβαλεῖται ἐν ἱματίοις λευκοῖς). The verb περιβάλλω, usually translated as "to dress" means "to put on clothing to adorn the outward form of something."<sup>42</sup> The semantics of this word send to an attentive attire, with an aesthetic sense and which ultimately leads to a pleasing image to the eye (not coincidentally the textual situation usually suggested by exegetes is that of Luke 12,28: "...how God clothes the grass of the field..."). The beauty of the clothing is also given by the white color of the clothes. The text uses the word λευκός which, in Greco-Roman culture, was more than a color in itself: it can just as well be translated as "bright" or "brilliant". "White garments symbolize a range of positive meanings that center on the concept of ritual and moral purity. Heavenly messengers are frequently described as wearing white garments (2Macc 11,8; Matt 28,3; John 20,12; Acts 1,10; Rev 4,4; 19,14) and in Dan 7,9; 1Enoh 14,20, God is described as wearing white (just as deities in the Greco-Roman world were thought to wear white). Priests in the ancient world often wore white (Exod 29,4; Lev. 16,4), as did worshipers who participated in sacrifices and processions."<sup>43</sup> In this case, "the white clothes" are "metaphors of conversion as re clothing, sometimes in

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<sup>42</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 525.

<sup>43</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1997) 223.

relation to baptism itself.”<sup>44</sup> This notion is “also prominent in the Pauline Letters (Gal. 3.27; Col. 3.10-12 etc.). These particular clothes have wider and older associations with celebration and triumph (Eccles. 9.8).”<sup>45</sup> We have, therefore, a whole symbolism of purity, holiness and honour.<sup>46</sup>

Second, the Saviour commits Himself to the conqueror by words: “I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life” (οὐ μὴ ἐξαλείψω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῆς βίβλου τῆς ζωῆς). The notion of “the book of life” it is associated by most exegetes with two Old Testament texts: Exodus 32.32 (“But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written”) and Ps 69.28 (“May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous”). In the first instance, Moses pleads before God that the people who have fallen into idolatry should not be rejected, even suggesting their erasure from His book; On the second occasion, David utters a curse against his enemies, asking God to erase their names from His book. “Those passages warn of sinners being blotted out of God’s scroll, earning that they are threatened with death.”<sup>47</sup> And in the New Testament we find (at least) two passages that lead to the same notion: one of these is the statement of Jesus: “do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10,30); and the other an excerpt from the writings of the apostle Paul (Phil 3,20-4,3). Revelation contains two more references to the “book of life”: 13,8 (“All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world”) and 17,8 (“The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come”). Thinking about the immediate context, we can make a connection between the registration of citizens in the Roman Empire (an honourable fact in relation to those who were not citizens) and the writing of names in the book of God.<sup>48</sup> In a spiritual sense, this record is a definitive assurance.

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group 2014) 172.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*, 172-173.

<sup>46</sup> For exegetical and dogmatic details of these three elements, see: Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 314.

<sup>47</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 315.

<sup>48</sup> “When authorities in some cities passed judgment on a person for a capital crime, that person’s name was removed from the list of citizens and the death sentence was carried out.” (Craig R. Koester, *Revelation. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 315)

Third, Christ promises that “will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels” (ὁμολογήσω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐνώπιον τοῦ πατρὸς μου καὶ ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀγγέλων αὐτοῦ). Closely related to the white robes and the writing of the name in the book of life, this testimony which Christ undertakes to bear before the angels is, in its own way, a confirmation of perfection. The verb ὁμολογέω, which means “to express openly one’s allegiance to a proposition or person”,<sup>49</sup> is used only here in Revelation. Most exegetes believe that we have here an allusion to the statement of Jesus from Luke 12,8: (“I tell you, whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God”) and Matt 10,32 (“Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven”). “The text in Revelation conflates, or combines, this word of Jesus, but it does not mention the aspect of denial found in both Synoptic sayings. Since a public forensic context is indicated in the earthly acknowledgment, heavenly courtroom scene is undoubtedly envisioned for the divine acknowledgment.”<sup>50</sup>

All three elements of the reward - white clothes, writing the name and solemn affirmation - lead to the idea of perfection. In the eschatological reality, finally, the Christian can reach that state to which he dreamed so passionately from the earth. We have here a full fulfilment of an endeavour which only the victors are able to submit.

### Stability’s reward

The sixth letter, to the Church in Philadelphia, ends with words: “The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name” (3,12).

The two rewards offered by Christ to this church are expressed with the help of two verbs: “to do” (ποιέω) and “to write” (γράφω). The Savior promises, therefore: “I will make a pillar in the temple of my God” (ποιήσω αὐτὸν στῦλον ἐν τῷ ναῷ τοῦ θεοῦ) and “I will write on them the name of my God” (γράψω ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ μου). We have on the one hand, the metaphor of *the pillar*, placed in the temple and, on the other hand, of *the name of God*. Thus, the

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<sup>49</sup> Johannes P. Louw, Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 418.

<sup>50</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, 84.

pillar is tied to the Temple, the new name is tied to the very person of God and the heavenly Jerusalem.

For the notion of pillar, we have the word στῦλος, which refers to "an upright shaft or structure used as a building support."<sup>51</sup> We need to know that "every Greco-Roman city had temples that were supported by pillars capped with exquisite capitals of the Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian orders. Coins from the Asian cities often featured pictures of their civic temples. For example, the temple of Artemis appears on many coins of Ephesus, some showing the correct number of eight pillars that fronted the temple while other types are miniaturized, showing only four pillars. Asian temples were built to withstand earthquake damage. Their foundations were laid on beds of charcoal covered with fleeces, which caused the structure to "float" on the soil like a raft. Each block was joined to another by metal cramps, so the platform was a unity. The temples would be among the most secure structures in the city."<sup>52</sup> Another possible comparison is with the temple of Solomon (1Kgs 7,15-21; 2Chr 3,15). The pillars of a building - no matter what its destination - give it stability and durability. They represent the resistance structure without which all other elements are zero.

The detail we need to keep in mind is that the reference is not made to "the actual temple nor to the Christian community, but rather to the heavenly temple, and is a metaphor for eschatological salvation."<sup>53</sup> Speaking of heavenly realities, the metaphor of the pillar is more imposing. Fulfilled in eternal life, this state promised by Christ can no longer be changed by anything from the outside, especially by the power and cunning of the devil. Like the pillars of ancient buildings (and beyond), the victors will remain forever in the presence of the sovereign God.

The second metaphor, closely related to that of the pillar, is *the name* (ὄνομα). This name is: (1) "of God himself"; (2) "of the city of God" (the new Jerusalem); and (3) "of Christ himself". So, we have the Father, the Son and the (heavenly) Jerusalem - a triad of a special amplitude. Notice this priority of the Father that we read about throughout the New Testament. The Son always relates to the Father through an attitude of exemplary respect, which is seen even in the above-mentioned gesture. If - as we observe in the Gospels - the

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<sup>51</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, 87.

<sup>53</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 241. "For the emphasis on the *pillars* in a description of the eschatological Jerusalem, see 1Enoch 90,28-29, where the phrases *old house* and *new house* symbolize the earthly and the eschatological Jerusalem, respectively, with includes the temple thought it is not specifically mentioned." (*idem.*)

whole work of the Son finds its full fulfilment in the Father, then it is normal for the victor to be - by this inscription of the name - anchored in the Father.

Heavenly Jerusalem is a theme that will be repeated at the end of Revelation: "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (21,10). The apostle Paul also talks about "the Jerusalem that is above" and which is "our mother" (Gal 4, 26). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives us a broader description of the heavenly Jerusalem in words: "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly" (12, 22). Therefore, the image of the heavenly Jerusalem is present in the imaginary of the New Testament, both in Paul and in John, which confirms its use in the Judeo-Christian environment. Jerusalem - with all its history and symbolic significance - is the most appropriate metaphor. Here we have the idea of stability, grandeur, and delight - elements that define the eschatological atmosphere so well.

The third element is that of the name of Christ, and this fact has at least two implications. "First, the writing of Christ's name on their foreheads is the ultimate sign of ownership, but an ownership not of enslavement but of ultimate and glorious freedom. Second, the "new name" is almost certainly an intentional foreshadowing of the vision in 19:11-21, where Christ the heavenly warrior defeats and thus destroys the beast. There is Christ's "new name" is "King of kings and Lord of lords"; and now in anticipation of that scene the victors in Philadelphia are promised to have that name written on them as well."<sup>54</sup>

The main metaphor - that of the *pillar* - undoubtedly refers to the notion of support, strength, and permanence. An indispensable architectural element, the pillar (or pillars) of a building forms its structure of resistance, the often-unseen part that supports it. This fact is observed, indirectly, in the case of the ruins, when - although the building collapsed - the pillars still stand, proving their durability. The conqueror will enjoy eternal stability on the part of Christ, thus sharing a destiny to which he has always longed. Delivered from impotence and limitations, he will have the life of God, in a kingdom that will never end.

### **Royalty's reward**

The seventh letter, to the Laodicean Church, ends with the words: "To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne" (3,21). The word

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<sup>54</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation: a New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011) 57.

"throne" does not actually appear in the Greek text, but is only implied by the verb "to sit (seated)", for which the term is used καθίζω: "to be in a seated position or to take such a position."<sup>55</sup> We need to know from the beginning that "while the promise that Christians will reign with Christ occurs occasionally in the New Testament (2Tim 2,12), it occurs with striking frequency in Revelation (1,6; 5,10; 20,4; 22,5) and is a conception partially modelled after Dan 7,18 and 27."<sup>56</sup> This connection between Daniel and Revelation is not an isolated phenomenon, both being books with apocalyptic content and, therefore, the similarities are self-evident.

Another connection, this time in the immediate context of the statement, is between this promise and the preceding statement that the Lord enters the one who opens them and sits at the table with him (v. 20). "Impressed by the fact that cognates of δειπνέω occur in other Eucharistic passages (Luke 22:20; John 13:2, 4; 21:20; 1 Cor 11:20, 21, 25), together with the context, a number of scholars have inferred that the sacrament is in view. The Risen Jesus would then be calling the Laodicean believers not so much to conversion but to renewal, symbolized by the Eucharist qua fellowship meal, signifying a restored relationship between the divine and human co-participants. Other allusions to the Lord's Supper in Revelation are less direct."<sup>57</sup>

With or without this connection, "the promise to the victors in this case most likely intends to affirm that at the eschatological consummation of things they will share not the right to reign as such but will experience as the ultimate privilege of their redemption: being enthroned as royalty. At the same time, one must not miss the exceptionally high Christology that such language entails—that the Son and the Father sit on the same throne and thus share equally in the divine majesty that belongs to God alone."<sup>58</sup>

This promise must be associated with one of Christ's statements in the Gospel of Luke: "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (22,29-30). This statement probably applies, "not just to the parousia but to what began even in the lives of the

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<sup>55</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 215. The verb is used in connection with Jesus (Jn 4,6; 20,12), but also in connection with other persons: the paralytic (Acts 3:10) or the poor (Jas 2,3).

<sup>56</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 261.

<sup>57</sup> Nicholas Perrin, "Sacrament and Sacramentality in the New Testament", in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, eds. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 100.

<sup>58</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation: a New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 61.

disciples, either at the transfiguration or Pentecost [cf. Mark 9:2–8]). Those in the church who begin to overcome may even enjoy the inauguration of this promise before death, since it is clear from [Revelation] ch. 1 that believers are already participants in Christ’s kingdom (so 1:5–6, 9; see also on 2:26–28).”<sup>59</sup>

Although the promise made to the conquerors of Laodicea is related exclusively to their eternal destiny, we can consider that Christ shares a certain authority with his Church, placing it in a privileged position since this historical and earthly reality. Limiting and ephemeral, this elevation of the Church over all the world is, in essence, spiritual. The Lord never intuited an earthly supremacy of the Church on the scale of history, a political positioning of it, if He - during the messianic activity - did not operate in these terms. But through the authority that the Church exercises in the spiritual world, she anticipates the full authority she will receive from Christ at the end of time.

“We are victors because of the victory He won. As the Son shares the throne of His Father, we share the throne of the Son... Because of our union with the victorious Lamb, we not only get heaven; we also get a throne.”<sup>60</sup> This association between the throne of Christ and our throne, in fact the same dignity that the conqueror will share with Christ, together with all the privileges that flow from here, are significant elements. The spiritual battle that the Church must fight is not in vain. The horizon of waiting is beyond this world, finding its ultimate fulfilment in this shared royalty. The imposing image of God as king in the Old Testament and that of God as father in the New Testament is transformed here into that of the King who shares His royal dignity with the victors. The prospect is overwhelming, especially because of its eternal dimension.

## Conclusion

The entire book of Revelation considers “history as the only possible and necessary framework for understanding and expressing God’s will.”<sup>61</sup> In this framework, daring and pure, the Church of Christ consistently bears her own testimony. The vocation of the Church is to keep the Church in this perimeter and to always have the consciousness of universality. The fate of the world on the scale of history depends on the victory of the Church, even if this is not always obvious, and the seven churches in Asia Minor - through the exhortations and promises received - confirm this truth.

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<sup>59</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 545.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Revelation* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2016), 139.

<sup>61</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Subminarea creștinismului*, trad. Octavian Soviany (Arad: Sens, 2018), 40.

Although, from a strictly narrative point of view, each promise contains specific metaphors, unique formulations, and particular details, some generally valid statements can be formulated. First, *the sacrificial element* is observed. In different ways, the faithful in the seven churches go through different forms of suffering, which gives them the chance of victory. The situations that each community goes through are, in fact, providential opportunities for each to be able to prove their own devotion. "The greatness of the Book of Revelation lies not in its external framework, but in the loyalty of its author to what he believed to be a divine warfare and in the success of his book in arousing other to similar loyalty to moral and spiritual truth. The journey of life does not depend for its success upon time and place, but upon the development of a life within, which may be described as spiritual illumination."<sup>62</sup>

Secondly, *the Christological element* is observed. The notion of conquerors "should not fix our attention solely on the individual overcomer, but on Christ himself who through his sacrifice makes the victory possible. His victory gives the believer the potential to persist in faith and persevere in hope to the end."<sup>63</sup> Believers in Asia Minor have a chance to win the spiritual battle because Christ Himself has won. Everything must be read in a Christological key, especially this profound connection between the passions of the Saviour and the sufferings of His Church. Victory on the cross, permanent companionship, and future rewards are all related to His messianic work. Without this saving work, done exclusively by Christ, everything would have been doomed to failure, both individually and at the community level.

Third, *the eschatological element* is observed. It is evident that all the promises of Christ go beyond the horizon of earthly life. They are so great, so precious, that they can only be valid on the horizon of eternity. The rewards promised by Christ are for the purpose of encouraging Christian communities. Placed in an obvious eschatological horizon, their message "remain faithful to God in Christ by the power of his Holy Spirit until he returns in glorious victory over all his enemies. Remain faithful until God returns."<sup>64</sup> Through these promises, in the most concrete way possible, the Saviour binds believers to the realities of the world to come. Everything that happens in their earthly existence, even the most mundane events, is quantified providential in the future reality.

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<sup>62</sup> Carl Everett Purinton, *The Re-Interpretation of Jesus in the New Testament* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009), 161.

<sup>63</sup> Gregory J. Laughery, *Living Apocalypse. A Revelation Reader and A Guide for the Perplexed* (Destinée S.A., 2008), 36.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew Y. Emerson, *Between the Cross and the Throne. The Book of Revelation* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016), 77.

Fourth, *the parenthetical element* is observed. Each community is promised a certain reward, so God does not forget anyone. The primary recipients were really encouraged to know that there is the prospect of victory and that nothing - not even death - can take believers out of God's hands. "For today's readers, the continuing relevance of Revelation lies in its power to present this heavenly perspective in every situation in which God's authority seems to be defeated by the powers of the world. Its purpose is not to provide simple information about the future, but to help the Christian live in the way that God's final purpose for the world demands."<sup>65</sup> All the promises of Christ have this motivating purpose: they must cause the believer to stand firm, to resist any temptation, and to do good even in a world invaded by evil.

The promises made by Christ to the seven churches express, albeit in an indirect way, what in dogmatic theology is called *assurance of salvation*. It is, as is well known, that confidence of final salvation. This assurance - which every Christian is called to experience - is based on God's preservation, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit and believers' perseverance. This emotional and spiritual comfort was very important for the generation of St. John the Apostle, especially in the conditions in which persecution became an increasingly present reality. Christian communities needed an encouraging message, and it could only be Christological. Without Christ, without His protection and goodwill, all their hopes were in vain. Their need for certainty is obvious, but also for the Church over the centuries. The more adverse the times, the more faith must be strengthened, both at the individual level and at the community level. And, beyond all this, the perspective of the victor must be put in the right place, as a finality that God has ordained for every believer.

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<sup>65</sup> Richard Bauckham, "Înțelegerea cărții Apocalipsa", in Pat and David Alexander (eds.), *Manual biblic*, trad. Iulia Bodnari (Oradea: Casa Cărții, 2012), 771.