A ‘BASSO OSTINATO’ IN THE STRUCTURING OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN?

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ABSTRACT
The Apocalypse of John can be regarded as an artistically knitted narrative. However, the question remains how such a unity can be described. From the viewpoint of the theory of music very valuable insights can be gained which help the exegete to view the text of the Apocalypse as a unity. It seems that in such a reading the references to the Christ-event function like the so-called musical 'basso ostinato' which can be applied as the melody, binding the three acts of the Apocalypse together as a unity. In such a way the designation of the description of the Christ-event as a 'basso ostinato' leads the exegete to a fresh view on the unity of the text of the Apocalypse of John.

1 A UNIQUE NARRATIVE
It is rather difficult, if not impossible, to postulate anything exegetically new concerning a New Testament text, such as the Apocalypse of John. Nevertheless, new and different viewpoints may highlight new aspects in any text. Therefore, the purpose of this contribution is simply to view and describe the text of the Apocalypse of John from a different angle—a combination of musicological and narratological perspectives.

From a literary point of view many exegetes view the Apocalypse of John as a unique narrative (cf Barr 1984 1986; Thompson 1985; Du Rand 1991a, 1991b). Such a point of departure does not imply that any other valuable method of analysis is simply rejected. Instead, the purpose is to listen to the text as an artistic whole.

The Apocalypse is not an esoteric sectarian response to a crisis (cf A Collins 1984:84) or a distorted dissertation on Christian being, but a serious attempt to involve the readers in order to make them understand more about Christian existence. Adela Collins, for example, emphasises the cathartic effect of the text, although she understands it to be tied up with the possible socio-historical context. The perspectives of Hans Robert Jauss in this respect are helpful and inspirational. He says that the aesthetic or cathartic dimension of a literary work, such as the Apocalypse, involves the reader’s identification with ideas, characters or situations in a narrative (cf Jauss 1982a, 1982b). Application of
this to the narrative of the Apocalypse of John implies that the reader responds aesthetically by way of association, sympathy, admiration, catharsis or irony. It also means that the reader is constructively involved in the communication process of the Apocalypse as a whole. Thus the Apocalypse is treated as religious literature, to be viewed as providing perspectives on the world, life and God (McKnight 1978:272).

Schüssler Fiorenza, on the other hand, argues that both internal and external controls should be employed for the purpose of a full synthetic literary analysis (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1985:22; Harris 1989: 25-30). According to her, the structuring of the Apocalypse should not only be founded on formalistic grounds but also on a morphological approach that elucidates the form-content of the text. The compositional structuration is derived from the literary function of the text in its present historical-literary context, but is also encountered in smaller units of the text. This is a significant viewpoint, but still does not answer the question as to the unity of structure of the narrative.

Therefore the question still remains whether the Apocalypse can be viewed as a unity in which those whose life experience has become a crisis can associate with the story as a living performance (cf Barr 1986:400-411). This contribution will primarily focus on the literary codes as well as the content of the text of the Apocalypse, in an endeavour to propose the standpoint that the Apocalypse of John can and should be viewed as an artistically weaved narrative. Such a view will enable the exegete to arrive at a new reading of the text by integrating viewpoints from the theory of music, reader response criticism and theological interpretation.

A meaningful answer to the question regarding the Apocalypse as a unity is required. Different meritorious divisions have concentrated on particular structuring principles in an effort to bind the content of the Apocalypse into a unity. These include: the twofold chronological division (cf e g Charles 1920; Kraft 1974; Bratcher 1984), numerical division (cf e g Farrer 1949; Lohmeyer 1953), theological (cf e g Ellul 1977), poetic (cf e g Kiddle 1940), liturgical (cf e g Shepherd 1960; Lohse 1960), text-linguistic (cf e g Hellholm 1986) and drama (cf e g Bowman 1955) divisions. The parallel progression analysis by Lambrecht (1980), concentric division by Schüssler Fiorenza (1977) and two cycles of visions by A Collins (1976) also deserve mentioning.

On the other hand, any meaningful division of the Apocalypse, should take into consideration the abovementioned structuring principles in an endeavour to approach the reading of the Apocalypse as a functional process in which the readers become part of the story as a unity. Through an existential experience of the story of the Apocalypse in all its parts, the readers are, by way of interpretation, convinced of the unfolding plot of God's accomplishment of salvation and judgment through Jesus Christ in a succession of events (cf Du Rand 1991:310).
2 LIKE A NARRATED MUSICAL DRAMA

Experiencing the Apocalypse as an interpreted theological unity with definite effect can be compared with a musical composition. Achieving a meaningful comparison forces us to take note of some of the outstanding components of a musical composition, as well as of listening strategies (cf Harrison 1981:12).

In a sense we listen to music on three planes, namely the sensuous (naïve), expressive (meaning) and sheerly musical planes which can be compared to naïve, and exegetical or theological readings of an ancient text, such as the Apocalypse. Furthermore, the composer always starts with a musical theme which may consist of a succession of notes to be varied in different metamorphoses by experimenting with the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony and tone color. We should also take note of the varieties of musical texture, such as monophonic (cf Gregorian chant), homophonic (a melodic line and chordal accompaniment) and polyphonic (separate strands of melody) textures. We find almost the same variety in the text of the Apocalypse: sometimes the ‘monophonic’ linear narrative is alternated with a ‘polyphonic’ description of different meanings within the same event (e.g. chapter 12).

What we would really like to compare with the Apocalypse is the structure of music. Copland says: ‘... the reader should realise that one of the principal things to listen for when listening more consciously, is the planned design that binds an entire composition together’ (1957:113). Whether a piece of art is sculptured, written or composed, the coherent organisation of the artist’s material in order to achieve meaningful communication is essential. Prominent principles employed in musical structure to create balance are repetition (Copland 1957:119) or nonrepetition, which can be compared to recapitulation in the Apocalypse (cf the repetition of the sevenfold seals, trumpets and bowls). Musical structure further distinguishes between exact, symmetrical, variational, fugal and developmental repetition (cf Witten 1990:55). And this brings us to the heart of a possible comparison with the structure of the Apocalypse. It seems that the so-called ‘basso ostinato’ as variation form fits this comparison. Let me explain. The ‘basso ostinato’ or ‘ground bass’ is ‘a short phrase, either an accompanimental figure or an actual melody’ which ‘is repeated over and over again in the bass part while the upper parts proceed normally’ (Copland 1957:145) It has the function of binding the composition together as a unity. We find striking examples in the Pastorale for piano by Sibelius and The Coronation of Poppea by Monteverdi composed in 1642. The example of the dragging sounds of Dido’s lament in Purcell’s opera Dido and Aeneas is well known (cf Copland 1957:149). In the following example the ‘basso ostinato’ (‘ground bass’) is little more than an accompanimental figure, such as presented in the Pastorale for piano by Sibelius (cf Copland 1957:145-146):
In Monteverdi’s *The Coronation of Poppea* the ‘basso ostinato’ is no longer a mere figure but a melody in its own right. If the ‘ground bass’ is firmly established in the listener’s consciousness, the composer can variate in the remaining material (cf Copland 1957:148):
The passacaglia and chaconne are variational forms falling within the same category as the 'basso ostinato' (cf Hutchings 1968:47). Very often the variation
may be found in a theme and variations. As a rule, the theme is usually simple in the beginning before the process of variation commences. The different types of variation may be harmonic, melodic, rhythmic or contrapuntal, to name but a few. And very often the theme is stated again in its original form at the end to bind the music together as a unity (cf the three eight notes and the quarter note in the fifth symphony of Beethoven). The first movement of Mozart’s A major Piano Sonata which takes the form of a theme and six variations, is a beautiful example.

But, to come closer to the point, adding up the similarities in the comparison so far, brings us to the opera or musical drama as particular field of comparison (cf Dixon 1992:118). By way of interpretation it may be accepted that what we see on the opera stage only mirrors realities, and that such a representation can sometimes provides even greater aesthetic pleasure than the merely realistic. Through music and visualised drama the receptor is symbolically motivated to come to grips with real life (e.g. Wagner’s Die Walküre). The introduction of the so-called Leitmotiv in operatic drama implies that a theme or coherent musical idea is modified on subsequent appearances to represent or symbolise an idea, state of mind or object in a dramatic work (cf Reti 1961:5; Leisinger 1990:103-119). The main purpose of the Leitmotif therefore is to unify a piece of music or opera (cf Warrack 1992:644). If we were able to identify a Leitmotif in the form of a ‘basso ostinato’ with variations in the Apocalypse as an interpreted musical drama, we would also be able to understand the Apocalypse as a narrated musical drama, to be judged as a unity. Although the visual part may change from scene to scene in this apocalyptic drama, the reader is often reminded of the characteristically repeated Leitmotiv or variated ‘basso ostinato’ which gives cohesion to the narrative of the Apocalypse as a unity.

3 A NARRATIVE BASSO OSTINATO

The following references from the Apocalypse are selected in order to list only the obvious direct references to the so-called functional Christ-event as such. The indirect or general references to God and Jesus Christ are not included in the list. The idea is to identify a particular ‘basso ostinato’ as stringing or ‘structuring’ motif in the narrative.

1:51 ‘... and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, …’
1:7 ‘... and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; …’

1 The translation of the New International Version, New York International Bible Society, 1978, is used.
1:9 ‘... because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ...’
1:13 ‘... among the lamp stands was someone “like a son of man,” ...’
1:18 ‘... I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!’ ...
2:8 ‘These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.’
3:4 ‘... dressed in white, for they are worthy’
3:5 ‘He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. ...’
3:9 ‘... and acknowledge that I have loved you.’
3:14 ‘... the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, ...’
3:18 ‘... and white clothes to wear, ...’
3:21 ‘... just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.’
4:4 ‘... They were dressed in white ...’
5:2 ‘...Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’
5:4 ‘... no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll ...’
5:5 ‘... See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll ...’
5:6 ‘Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it has been slain, ...’
5:9 ‘... You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God ...’
5:11 ‘... Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, ...’
5:13 ‘... To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb ...’
6:1 ‘I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals ...’
6:11 ‘Then each of them was given a white robe, ...’
6:16 ‘... hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!’
7:9 ‘... before the throne and in front of the Lamb. ...’
7:10 ‘... who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. ...’
7:13 ‘... These in white robes— who are they, ...’
7:14 ‘... they have washed their toes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’
7:17 ‘For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ...’
11:8 ‘... Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.’
11:15 ‘... has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, ...’
12:5 ‘... And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.’
12:10 ‘...Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. ...’
12:17 ‘... and hold to the testimony of Jesus. ...’
13:3 ‘One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. ...’
13:8 ‘... all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging
According to the list above, the Leitmotif or 'basso ostinato' in the narratological unfolding of the plot of the Apocalypse can be described as the enacting of the decisive and functional commitment of God to accomplish salvation as well as judgement, particularly based on the Christ-event. The Christ-event, by way of interpretation, forms the 'basso ostinato' which binds the narrative of the Apocalypse into a unity. In every act we find God's accomplishment of salvation and judgement (cf Du Rand 1991:312). In chapters 1-3 God judges the attitude and deeds of the church, announces judgement and promises salvation. In chapters 4-11 the heavenly celebration of God's creative victory is interrupted, because no one can be found to open up the sealed scroll to unfold
God's will in history, until the Lamb steps forward. Then follows the seals and trumpets as unfolding of God's judgement in the cosmos. Salvation is demonstrated by the heavenly worship (chapter 5), the sealing of the anointed (chapter 7), the salvation of the witnesses (chapter 11) and the climax that the kingship of this cosmos belongs to the Lord and his Anointed (11:15). Chapters 12-22 emphasise the historical birth of the child as the carrier of the Leitmotif. The child who is born brings salvation and victory and stands in contrast to the dragon and beasts. It all ends with the images of the two women—the immoral one and the bride, the heavenly Jerusalem. The different acts or movements in the musical drama are harmonised by the theological 'basso ostinato' that God's act of commitment through the Lamb is functional. Each stage act rests on the momentum of the Christ-event which constitutes the Leitmotif, providing cohesion and unity.

After plotting the frequency of the selected occurrences of an interpreted 'basso ostinato', reference to the Christ-event and its meaning, it is useful to analyse the occurrences very broadly and briefly. The focus falls primarily on the concept lamb in all its variations, indicating in most cases the event through which God brought about salvation and judgement. The image of the lamb, mirror-images, imitation and parody are at stake. The purpose is not to concentrate on the general Christological references in Revelation, (like the Messianic war; Exodus or witness motives (cf Bauckham 1993:67-73), but rather on the functional (Christ-event) emphases. The term lamb (arnion) is applied to Christ twenty-eight times in Revelation (5:6,8,12,13; 6:1,16; 7:9,10,14,17; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1,4(2),10; 15:3; 17:14(2); 19:7,9; 21:9,14,22,23,27; 22:1,3).

It is found that the theological lamb motif as 'basso ostinato' is crucial in the narrative of the Apocalypse. Läpple underlines this by stating: 'Die apokalyptische Symbolfigur ist das Lamm. Dahinter steht eine geschichtliche Persönlichkeit, der am Kreuz gestorbene Gottesknecht' (1984:45; cf Comblin 1965:5-40). The Lamb first appears in 5:5-7 as the slaughtered; and in 14:1 with the heavenly army; in 19:7,9 in reference to his marriage and in 21:9 with his bride. On the one hand the term Lamb, referring to Christ, emphasises his death, and on the other hand his triumph as the Resurrected. In 5:5-6, where the lamb is mentioned, the seer expects the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David. This language is derived from passages which were given a messianic interpretation in Genesis 49:9-12 and Isaiah 11:1-5 (cf Laws 1988:27). This does, however, not mean that the term lamb was already established as a messianic title (cf 1 Enoch 85-90). The references to the lion of Judah and the root of David, however, place the term lamb in 5:5-7 in a messianic climate. The fact that the Lamb later appears as the bridegroom of the new Jerusalem (cf 19:7,9; 21:9) reminds us messianically of the Lord who is presented as the Bridegroom of Israel (e.g Isa 54:5; Ezek 16:8f; Hos 2:14-20). Further, we read that the
Lamb was ‘standing, as though it had been slain’ (5:6), which brings this image into the Christian interpretative imagery of Christ as the sacrificial lamb, although the term *arnion* is used instead of *amnos*, and the verb used, *sphazo*, is not the usual term for sacrificial killing which would be *thuo*. The narrator of the Apocalypse uses the term *lamb* to relate it to the fact of the death of Jesus. Furthermore, the ‘standing’ lamb is related to his resurrection. This confirms the choice of *lamb* as the dominant Leitmotiv or ‘basso ostinato’ which binds the composition of the Apocalypse into a unity theologically. This is also reflected in the adversaries of the Lamb, namely the beasts (13:1-18; 17:3-13) dragon (12:1-17) and harlot (17:1-7, 15-18), as well as in the description of the martyrs who have witnessed (1:9; 12:11,17; 19:10) and are clothed in white linen because of the Christ-event (3:4,5,18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:13,14), and who sing a new song (14:3; 15:3) because their names are written in the book of life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8). In the background of all these selected references stands the Christ-event as God’s decisive act of salvation and judgement. It seems evident that the Christ-event as theological structuring principle binds the narrative together into a unity.

4 MUSIC AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE—CONCLUSION

After identifying the Christ-event as the narratological ‘basso ostinato’ or Leitmotif in the Apocalypse, it seems technically correct in view of the above analysis to view such a Leitmotif in accordance with musical theory rather than as a theme with variations. The Christ-event is not exactly repeated throughout the Apocalypse in the same form or pattern but variated by the narrator in order to concentrate on the slaughtered Lamb, the resurrected triumphant Lamb, the adversaries of the Christ-event, as well as the followers as faithful witnesses to the Christ-event, with their white clothes, sharing in the tree of life. 

According to the musical theme and variations as variational form, it is best to have the theme simple and direct in order that the listener may remember the Leitmotif before the increasingly complex variation process begins (cf Copland 1957:157). Variations are often loosely strung together by a general sense of balance and contrast in the structural unity. In other words, the separate parts of the musical drama, are joined by their cumulative effect. Very often the theme is stated at the beginning and repeated in developed and variated form at the end. This is also the case in the Apocalypse. The concept of the slaughtered Lamb (5:5-7), is developed in the unfolding of the story to become the triumphant Lamb (14:1,4,10; 15:3; 17:14) and to finish the narrative as the reigning Lamb sharing the throne with God (19:7,9,10; 21:9,14,22,23; 22:1,3). This is remarkable! Just like in music, this development brings the readers who find themselves in a crisis situation to a catharsis on psychological level. The reca-
pituation, breaks, repetitions, insertions and ostensible incoherences are brought into harmony by the Leitmotif of the Christ-event in all its variations. Recapitulation succeeds in emphasising the intentions of the narrator (e.g. the meaningful repetition of the seals, trumpets and bowls) and the insertions comprise the formal usage of the symbols (e.g. the sealing in chapter seven) to bind the narrative into a unity. In the appropriation of recapitulation in the Apocalypse we find progression through repetition and interpretation. It helps to accentuate the unfolding of God’s judgement in the flow of the narrative.

In the process of describing cohesion, it is worthwhile to take brief notice of the following statistics, illustrating the inner formal coherence of the narrative of the Apocalypse: Contrasts (e.g. the Lamb against beasts and the two women in chapters 12 and 17); cross references (e.g. the images of Christ in chapter 1, repeated in chapters 2-3 and 19:11-16); numerical structural cycles of seven that serve to unfold the narrative; repetitions of symbols (e.g. the combination of the colour white and the throne: 1:4; 2:13; 3:21; 6:16; 7:9,10,11,15,17; 8:3; 11:16; 12:5; 20:11; 22:1,3); intercalations, in which two scenes are interrupted by another scene (e.g. ABA pattern; 10:1-11:14 and 12-14 interrupted by 11:15-19 to emphasise the seventh trumpet); interlocking, in which certain scenes have a hinge function in order to link up with the preceding as well as the following events (e.g. 4:1ff reaches back to 1:10 as well as to 5:1ff) and structural linking on the level of content (e.g. the repetition of war in heaven: chapters 12,17,18 and 21:9-22:5). With regard to structural cohesion we should also mention the expression ‘by the Spirit’ (en pneumati): according to 1:10, John is on the island; according to 4:2, he is in heaven; according to 17:3, he is in the desert, and according to 21:10, he is taken to a high mountain. These stylistic features, characteristic of the Apocalypse, emphasise its definite similarity to a musical composition and should be taken into consideration in structuring the narrative of the Apocalypse.

Relating the musical strategies of the ‘basso ostinato’ or theme with variations to the narrative form and content of the Apocalypse, brings us to a possible description of the dramatic narrative, like a musical, in three acts, staging God’s accomplishment of salvation and judgement:

° ACT ONE: God’s involvement in the church because of the Christ-event (chapters 1-3).

° ACT TWO: The unfolding of God’s plan of salvation and judgement in the cosmos on the grounds of the Christ-event (chapters 4-11).

° ACT THREE: The final unfolding of God’s salvation and judgement in the history because of the Christ-event (chapters 12-22).
Each act is bound together by the Leitmotif of God's unfolding of salvation and judgement. And each act rests on the work of Jesus Christ, the Lamb, slaughtered but triumphant. The binding and structuring element in the plot of the Apocalypse can be heard and experienced in the repetition of the 'basso ostinato', the Christ-event as recognised apocalyptic 'melody' or Leitmotiv, serving to bind the whole narrative together into a unity.

WORKS CONSULTED


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