

A Tale of Two Scrolls¹

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It was forty-seven years ago, in another century and another land, that I sat where this year's graduates now sit. As I debated about what to say this evening, and thought back to my own seminary graduation trying to find something that might be particularly relevant to today's graduates, I was deeply humbled by the realization that I remember little of the speech in my own graduation. (At that time, we had only one graduation ceremony, combined with a baccalaureate service.) I do not even remember who the speaker was! What I most remember is that there on a table sat a small pile of diplomas, and that I spent most of the speech wondering when the speaker would sit down, so that we could get on with the business of receiving our degrees. Time was not moving, and the commencement speaker seemed terribly long-winded. I remember passing the time counting heads and counting diplomas, trying to figure out which of those little scrolls with ribbons tied around them would actually be mine.

As I reflect on that experience, I remember another biblical figure who also received a little scroll—as you, too, will receive tomorrow. It is from the book of Revelation, chapter 10. Allow me to read a few verses:

And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He held a little scroll open in his hand. Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ... Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter. Then they said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Clearly, this passage is patterned after Ezekiel 2 and 3, where the prophet is given a scroll to eat. But before we turn to that text, we must look at John's vision of the little scroll in the context of the book of Revelation itself.

This is a "little scroll." And it is open. It is not the great scroll with the seven seals, which only the victorious Lamb could open. Furthermore, it is held in the hand of an angel. It is not like the great scroll with the seven seals, which is held by the right hand of the One who sits on the throne, and passed directly from the Almighty God to the Almighty Lamb. Presumably, this little scroll does not contain the entire mystery of the ages, as the larger scroll does. It is much more modest than that. It is the word given to John to proclaim to the churches. In order to proclaim God's message to the churches, John does not need to digest the entire scroll with the seven seals.

What John is to proclaim is much humbler than any such grandiose vision. What he is to proclaim is the word that he has digested and assimilated in this little scroll.

Here the role of the prophet/evangelist/pastor/priest is put in its proper context. It is a very important role. So important, that a mighty angel brings it. But the prophet does not get to eat the great scroll with the seven seals.

And, let it be said in passing, the same is true of all of us. The parchments you will receive tomorrow represent much work and knowledge. They even represent your calling and commitment to a task so great that it is as if a mighty angel had brought it from heaven. But the knowledge represented in these little scrolls is as nothing compared with the majesty and the mystery of the great scroll of God's wisdom and God's grace.

Remember that, for there are two things that are absolutely necessary to be a good pastor, a good theologian, or a good lay Christian: First, you must take your calling with earnest seriousness, as if it had been handed to you by a mighty angel from heaven. Second, you must keep a sense of humor about yourself, remembering that all the knowledge and all the wisdom represented in those little scrolls, and all the knowledge and all the wisdom you might accumulate throughout your life, fall ridiculously short of God's great truth. For only the Lamb that was slain is worthy to open the great scroll with the seven seals. Remember that!

If we now compare the passage in Revelation with its literary background in Ezekiel 2 and 3, the parallelisms are obvious. There is no need to dwell on them. What is more striking, however, are two significant differences. The first is that, while Ezekiel says, "I ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey," John says: "it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter." Ezekiel speaks of a sweet word of God. For John, the word he is to proclaim is bittersweet.

The second difference has to do with the scope of the message of each of the two prophets. Ezekiel is told: "Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them. For you are not sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel—not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand." In contrast, the mighty angel tells John: "You must prophesy again *about* many peoples and nations and languages and kings." There is a connection between the two particular traits in John's vision vis-à-vis Ezekiel's: the bitterness in the stomach and the wide scope of the message.

If any writer of the New Testament was a Jew, and steeped in his own culture and traditions, that was John of Patmos. It has been pointed out that there is hardly a verse in his book that does not have an allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures. His Greek is full of Semitisms, perhaps due in part to his greater familiarity with Hebrew and with Aramaic, and perhaps as a result of his constant literary dependence on the Hebrew Bible. And he quotes that Bible, not from the Septuagint that all the other New Testament authors employed, but either from an unknown translation or from his own, which he does as he goes along.

He is well aware of the mission given to the prophet Ezekiel when he ate his scroll: Ezekiel was to speak only to the house of Israel, and they would not believe him. Now he, John, is not told to whom he is to speak, but about whom. The difference between Ezekiel's vision and John's is not that Ezekiel is to go to Israel, to a people who understand his language, and John is to go throughout the world, to many peoples and nations and languages and kings. The difference is rather that John is to go back to his audience, presumably the seven churches and other similar communities in Asia, and

speak to them *about* the many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings. And that is why the word of God, the little scroll that will be John's message, although sweet to the taste, is hard to stomach.

John the Jew, John who can quote the Hebrew Scriptures back and forth, apparently without even bothering to think about it, is given a message to proclaim to his congregations. His congregations are probably also mostly Jewish. Otherwise, they would hardly be able to understand this book he is writing to them, so full of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures, and even to more recent Jewish traditions. And now he is told that he is to speak to these congregations, not just the word they expect, that those who are faithful until death will receive the crown of life, or that everyone who conquers will receive some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a secret name, but he is to speak to them about "many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings." He is to speak to them, not only about how important it is that they be faithful in the impending tribulations and persecution, but also about "saints from every tribe and language and people and nation," whom the Lamb has made "to be a kingdom and priests serving God, and who will reign on earth." And that is bitter to his good Jewish stomach, as it is bitter to the stomach of any of us who are deeply steeped in our own cultural traditions.

All of this serves to remind us that, while the encounter of many peoples and cultures is intellectually and emotionally enriching, there are those who resent it. As the old certainties provided by a fairly parochial worldview are challenged by people coming out of different experiences, many respond in fear and bitterness—actually, we all do in one measure or another. They did in Jerusalem as they tried to get rid of a troublesome Galilean and his Galilean followers. They did in the Middle Ages, when Greeks and Latins decided they would rather have nothing to do with each other. And they do even today, when people arm themselves and perpetrate acts of terrorism in defense of racial purity and supposedly Christian values.

I submit to you that this will be one of the most difficult aspects of Christian ministry in this country in the century that has just begun. We are living in an unprecedented time in Christian history, when a faith that for centuries has been centered in the North-Atlantic has finally become a worldwide faith; a time when the growth of the church in far away places is nothing short of astounding: a time when the United Methodist Church in the tiny African nation of Ivory Coast is larger than the United Methodist Church in this great state of Georgia; when there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.; a time when we can rejoice in the sweetness of God's bringing to fruition the work and the sacrifice of missionary efforts of generations.

And yet, it will be difficult to proclaim this reality in our own churches. It will be difficult, because many will prefer a supposed gospel that does not challenge our exclusivisms and our tribalisms. People will resent the existence of a worldwide church of which we are no longer the center. People will resent that what they used to claim as the "faith of our fathers, holy faith" has been taken over by others with whom they have no common ancestry. People will resent having to look to Africa or to Asia for a clearer vision of what it means to be a Christian today.

And yet, faithfulness requires that we continually put forth the vision of John, of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of the Lamb."

It will not be easy. As cultural and racial tensions grow in the land, as some take it upon themselves to eliminate the tension by eliminating others, we shall more than ever need a church where people hear, not only about God's love for them, but also about the many tribes, and nations, and languages, whom God also loves.

Tomorrow you will receive a scroll that certifies your studies. It will come from the president and the dean (who may not look like mighty angels!). But it comes also from the same God who called you, and who invites you to take, together with the diploma that certifies your studies, also the little scroll that goes with your calling, to savor its sweetness and, even though it may be a bitter task, to go and tell this divided world, to go to this society of racial supremacies, to tell your own tribe and nation, to tell your own denomination, to tell them about the many tribes, and peoples, and languages, and nations whom God is calling and bringing together, as John of Patmos would say, to be a kingdom serving the Lord, until the day of the vision glorious, when a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, will jointly cry out in a loud voice saying: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb."

And to the One who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb who was slain, and to the Holy Spirit of God, *al Dios solo trino, nuestro Salvador, sea todo honor y gloria*, forever and ever. *Amén*.

Note

1. A sermon preached at the Baccalaureate service of Columbia Theological Seminary, celebrated in Columbia Presbyterian Church, Decatur, Georgia, May 15, 2004. Some of the material in this sermon has been published previously by the author in his book, *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in an Age of Cultural Conflict* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).