APOCALYPSE 2017

A Dramatisation of the Book of Revelation
adapted and directed by Patrick Boyde

Semi-staged performances in Greek
with music, images and surtitles

St John’s College (Divinity School Theatre)
Tuesday 14 and Wednesday 15 February 2017
Special thanks are due to the following, without whose support the production could never have taken place:

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Scott Mandelbrote, Christopher Rowland, Christian Sahner and Michael Silk contributed the rich and helpful essays for this programme.

Gillian Jondorf composed the surtitles, helped by Mary Emerson and Pauline Hire.

Mark Harrison, Sam Motherwell and Sudhir Rama Murthy gave many hours of help in assembling the Powerpoint Presentation.

Oscar Farley found hundreds of medieval images to create a pool of images from which those in the Presentation were selected.

James and Liz Willetts will be creating a DVD of the performance.

The cover picture of the Sixth Seal (*Il sesto sigillo*, polimaterico su tavola cm. 190 x110, 2016) is reproduced by kind permission of the artist, Marcello Silvestri.

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The music for the Prelude and the first entracte was composed and arranged by Oliver Vibrans.

The two chants in the second entracte are taken from the Tract of Sexagesima Sunday and the Kyrie of the Mass *De Angelis*. 
THE PERFORMERS

John                   Christos Tsirogiannis

John's 'alter ego'     Anthony Bowen

John’s 'eyes'          Alesia Preite
                        Giulia Sara Corsino

John’s 'ears'          Giles Waller
                        Patrick Boyde

John's 'arms'          Martin Worthington
                        Patrick Boyde

The Musicians

Voice                  Reuben Thomas

Trumpet                Ed Liebrecht

Synthesiser            Oliver Vibrans

The Projection Synchroniser

Elena Violaris
The Apocalypse in Zoroastrianism

Judaism and Christianity were not the only ancient religions to engage in apocalyptic thinking. Zoroastrianism – the state religion of pre-Islamic Iran – was also famous for its eschatological beliefs.

Zoroastrianism springs from the utterances of the prophet Zarathustra, who is believed to have lived somewhere in eastern Iran around 1000 BCE. Over time, the religion came to revolve around a belief in a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, embodied by the rivalry between the creator god Ohrmazd and his destructive counterpart Ahrimen. Ohrmazd brought the heavens, the earth, and their inhabitants into being as good material elements to aid in his war against Ahrimen. Ahrimen, meanwhile, created darkness, demons, and wicked animals to pollute the world and weaken the forces of light.

Zoroastrians believed that creation had to pass through three successive thousand-year stages in order to reach the end of time. At the end of each of these millennia, a different son of Zarathustra was supposed to appear, each tasked with ushering in the new age. The third and last of these sons was a saviour figure called the Sōšāns, whose task was to bring all of history to an end and oversee the restoration of creation to its primordial state of perfection. This restoration was known in Middle Persian as the Fraškerd, literally, ‘the making brilliant’.

According to Zoroastrian sources, the Fraškerd is a complicated process with many steps. The Sōšāns will begin by consulting with Ohrmazd, and, in the guise of a Zoroastrian high priest, he will raise the dead back to life. The texts predict great reunions of family and friends and a great banquet for the faithful. Reflecting Zoroastrianism’s emphasis on fertility, those who were unmarried in life will be given spouses at the resurrection. And in one of the most vivid scenes of all, the sources predict that the metal in the mountains will be melted, and the molten river that results from this will burn the wicked but bathe the righteous ‘as if they are being taken into warm milk.’ In the final scenes of the Fraškerd, the demons – led by the great dragon Dahāg – will be slain and scattered. Earth will be raised up to the level of the sun, where it will meet Paradise, uniting gods and men in a single plane of existence: a world of righteousness, contentment, and pleasure.

Although eschatology was an important feature of the Zoroastrian tradition from its earliest days, most of what we know comes from texts written and redacted in the Islamic period (after 650 CE). This should come as no surprise, since Zoroastrians (like Christians) interpreted the rise of Islam and the loss of their empire as foretastes of a looming apocalypse. Stories of the Sōšāns and the Fraškerd gave them hope of ultimate deliverance at a time when their social and political order was being upended by the new religion.

Christian C. Sahner
The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ

The opening words of the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ, have bequeathed a way of speaking about a category of writing, found in various religious traditions particularly among Jewish and Christian, canonical and non-canonical texts in antiquity. An apocalypse is characterised by claims to offer visions, or other disclosures of divine mysteries concerning a variety of subjects, including eschatological secrets, historical panoramas from creation to final redemption, the heavenly world and the activities of its inhabitants, the mysteries of human suffering and occasionally of the created world. Revelation continues, and to some extent transcends, and even supplants, earlier Jewish prophetic texts, in its witness to the fulfilment of the prophetic hope. The closest to Revelation in the Hebrew Bible is the book of Daniel, to whose imagery Revelation is much indebted.

In Revelation, apocalypse describes not only the mode of communication but its subject matter. Its origin is said be Jesus Christ, who commissions John to write what he sees and send it to the seven churches, but also it is about Jesus Christ who is key to the unfolding of the eschatological hope and the climax of history. The word ‘apocalypse’, with which it opens, suggests the dramatic nature and import of its words. The Book of Revelation epitomises the theological and intellectual convictions of the New Testament, and of emerging Christianity. The distinguishing, perhaps unique, feature of these convictions is that they offer us evidence not only of what was hoped for, but the conviction that the hope was already being fulfilled.

Despite the variety of its visions there is a basic structure, which owes much to Jewish eschatological expectation. A ‘time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence’ (Daniel 12:1) has to precede the establishment of the New Age. In Revelation these ‘messianic woes’ are depicted in three successive sequences of sevens (seals, trumpets, and bowls) before the Last Judgement and the coming of heaven on earth.

Initially, Revelation’s visions offer a stark contrast between heaven, where God is worshipped as creator and redeemer, and earth, dominated by evil empires. This is overcome when heaven comes down to earth and God tabernacles with humanity. Key to this is the Lamb ‘standing as though it had been slain’, who opens the sealed scroll of the final purposes of God for the cosmos, triggering devastation and judgement but also, ultimately, heaven on earth. Only then comes the moment when the opposing states of heaven and earth cease, when God dwells on earth with men and women, and sorrow and sighing flee away.

Christopher Rowland
The Apocalypse after John: Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Apocalypse was an exceptionally malleable genre of literature in the ancient world, often building upon and redeploying existing stories, symbols, and themes. Just as the Revelation of John represented a creative reworking of material originally found in the Book of Daniel, later Christian apocalypses drew upon material originally contained in the Old and New Testaments.

Many of the most important post-Biblical apocalypses – particularly in the West – were works of exegesis of John’s Revelation. The first example in Latin was written by Victorinus of Pettau (modern Slovenia) around 300 and was later popularised by the great Biblical scholar Jerome. Something similar occurred with the North African exegete Tyconius, whose commentary on Revelation was taken up and disseminated (despite its Donatist sympathies) by Augustine of Hippo. In subsequent centuries, a virtual ‘who’s who’ of early medieval churchmen wrote commentaries on the Apocalypse, including Cassiodorus, the Venerable Bede, Beatus of Liébana, and Alcuin of York. The commentary of Beatus, a monk from the Kingdom of Asturias in Spain, was especially influential for its rich illuminations, which survive in more than two dozen medieval manuscripts.

John’s Revelation had a more ambiguous status in the East, due largely to concerns about the text’s authorship and its fantastical contents. Among the Greek church fathers, Origen of Alexandria was an enthusiastic promoter of the book, though subsequent commentators – if they took note of the text at all – favoured more spiritual readings in contrast to the literalist approaches of their Western counterparts. In general, many eastern churches regarded John’s Apocalypse warily: the Greek Orthodox excluded it from their lectionary; and the Georgians did not translate it until the tenth–eleventh century.

While John’s Revelation may not have garnered as much attention in the East as in the West, this did not stop eastern Christians from composing new apocalyptic works. Drawing on imagery from Ezekiel and Daniel, these texts were often focused on the themes of eschatology and empire: that is, a belief that Byzantine imperial triumph would usher in the end of days. Thus, Byzantium’s victory over Sasanian Persia at the start of the seventh century – after a brutal twenty-five year war, which saw the theft and restoration of the True Cross in Jerusalem – was interpreted as a foretaste of an impending last judgment.

Imperial defeat also provided fodder for apocalyptic writers, particularly after Arab Muslim armies captured the Byzantine heartlands of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia. In the seventh and eighth centuries, many Christians living under Muslim rule saw Byzantium’s defeat as a divine rebuke for sin. Thus, they described the advent of Islam as the final stage before the coming eschaton, a moment of crisis leading directly to the Second Coming.

Christian C. Sahner
Biblical Tragedies

In 1671, defending his decision to compose a drama, *Samson Agonistes*, on a Biblical subject, John Milton looked around for precedents. In his preface to the play, ‘Of that Sort of Dramatic Poem Called Tragedy’, he noted that ‘Paraeus, commenting on the *Revelation*, divides the whole book, as a tragedy, into acts, distinguished each by a chorus of heavenly harpings and song between.’ For Milton, that precedent was perfect: his play, too, was presented as a tragedy divided into ‘acts’, each separated by a choral ode (supposedly to be sung), while ‘Paraeus’ was an esteemed Protestant thinker, like Milton himself.

‘Paraeus’ (or ‘Pareus’) was a German Calvinist (1548–1622: real name, David Wängler), whose many publications included a Latin commentary on the Book of Revelation (1618), subsequently translated into English (1644). In that commentary, Pareus identifies *Revelation* as a ‘prophe\-tical drama’ and declares, specifically, that ‘the form of this prophecy is truly tragical’, because ‘it representeth tragical motions and tumults of the adversaries against the Church of Christ, and at length the tragical end also of the wicked themselves.’

Like Patrick Boyde’s *Apocalypse 2017*, Milton’s tragedy is divided into five acts. With its chorus, and much else, it is closely modelled on the tragic dramas of ancient Greece, but the five-act structure itself, canonical for Renaissance and many later dramatists and theorists, is Roman rather than Greek. The principle of a five-act tragedy, along with the terminology of separate ‘acts’, is first fully attested in the *Ars Poetica* (c. 10 BCE?) of the Roman poet Horace: ‘No play should be shorter or longer than five acts’ (*neve minor neu sit quinto productior actu | fabula*: AP 189–90). And our earliest examples of extant tragedies that fit the precept are Seneca’s in mid-first century CE Rome, which generally (like Boyde’s *Apocalypse*) consist of five acts separated by choral odes, with the whole play introduced by an expository prologue or monologue.

As Pareus shows, the idea of the Book of Revelation as a drama is not new. But one curiosity remains. In 1618 Pareus read *Revelation* as a tragedy, with reference to the eventual fate of its (‘wicked’) human participants at the final judgement. In 1556 the Englishman John Foxe wrote a solemn Latin play with a comparable trajectory, *Christus Triumphans* (‘The Triumph of Christ’), but subtitled it *comoedia apocalyptic* \(\text{a} \) *comedy of revelation* – this, on the implicit grounds that recent, and imminent, historical events across Europe represented the realisation of the prophecies in the Book of Revelation, and, in particular, that Christ’s return (in ‘marriage’ to the reformed Church) would constitute a ‘happy ending’. The identification of the Biblical apocalypse as a ‘tragedy’, or otherwise, is evidently in the eye of the beholder.

Michael Silk
Isaac Newton and the Apocalypse

It often surprises modern readers that Isaac Newton (1642–1727) wrote extensively on the interpretation of biblical prophecy. Newton’s reading of the Bible was strongly literalist, but he brought wide learning to bear on his interpretations. Prophecy was an area of study that contemporary lay people were urged to avoid because of its complexity and the danger of falling into error through misunderstanding. Undeterred, Newton based himself on the writings of the early seventeenth-century Cambridge divine, Joseph Mede (1586–1638). He emulated Mede’s method by comparing the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation and combining them to tell a single story that could be checked and dated by its apparent fulfilment in the events of history. Thus he developed a chronological reading of the prophecies in Daniel and in Revelation with reference to the history of the Roman Empire and its successors. Within that reading, Newton’s conviction that the Christian Church had been corrupted by proponents of the doctrine of the Trinity was central. For Newton, Christ’s role was as a prophet, rather than as Messiah, who was yet to come.

The author of Revelation, Newton argued, wrote on Patmos, where he had newly arrived from Judea at a time of persecution (perhaps under Nero, 54–68 CE). The Greek that he composed was thus more influenced by the Aramaic of Palestine than by the Hellenistic language of the diaspora. The visions described in Revelation took place in the physical setting of the Temple in Jerusalem (which would be destroyed in 70 CE). They foretold events in the history of the Church which would be properly understood only once the prophecies had been fulfilled.

Reading Revelation chapters 8–11 in the light of Daniel 12, Newton completed an analysis of the spread of Islam and the rise of the Turks on which he commented thus: ‘I leave it to be decided by time, whether the Turkish Empire come to its end before the sounding of the seventh Angel, or whether we are only to understand that its last hostile act against the Catholicks will be over at the fall of the tenth part of the great city or soon after, but the Empire itself not ruined before the sounding of the seventh Angel.’ God’s punishment of the corrupted Christian Church would culminate in the delivery of the righteous by the return of the Messiah.

Then Newton turned to the question of the timing of these apocalyptic events, arguing that the period specified by Daniel’s ‘numbers relating to [the] time of the end… [seems] to me to begin either with that time 609 [CE] or perhaps a little later.’ Newton was arguing that the time from the utter corruption of Christianity by Trinitarians and Catholics and the establishment of the power of the Papacy to the restoration of the true, primitive religion might cover the period
from the beginning of the seventh century to the year 1900. But he remained cautious: Eastern Christendom resisted idolatry longer than the West, perhaps until 841 CE. The triumph of the Messiah might thus be delayed by a corresponding period, not yet completed…

Scott Mandelbrote

Seeing and Hearing

William Blake was one of the most imaginative and insightful interpreters of the Bible, especially of its visionary texts. A colleague and I taught a course in Oxford on the history of biblical interpretation, two prescribed books for which were the Book of Job and the Book of Revelation. Arising out of our collaboration we put together a presentation showing a Blake sequence of annotated images in his *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, extracts from the Book itself and excerpts from *Job A Masque for Dancing*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, which was itself inspired by Blake’s images. It was similar in some ways to those created by Patrick Boyle, one of which you are enjoying this evening. In his interpretation of the Book of Job, Blake used the references in Job to ‘dreams and visions of the night’, and the dramatic appearance of God to Job at the end of the book as the key to his interpretation, particularly the words, ‘I have heard thee with the hearing of the Ear but Now my Eye seeth thee’, Blake’s version of Job 42:5 in the KJV.

That contrast is also key to the Book of Revelation. After seeing the glory of God, John sees the Almighty with a scroll and hears one of the twenty-four elders asking ‘who will open the scroll’. At this point John weeps because no one is found worthy to open the scroll. He is told not to weep, because ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’
Then John notices something, which had hitherto slipped his attention: ‘And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain…’

William Blake’s painting ‘The Twenty Four Elders’ is a dramatic picture dominated by the bearded Almighty with a scroll with seven seals in his right hand, radiating glory. The image captures the ‘jasper and carnelian’, the emerald rainbow and the twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, the seven torches of Pentecostal fire burning before the throne, all of which are mentioned in John’s first heavenly vision. Just like John, who saw first a throne and the glory of the Almighty, a viewer of Blake’s picture could be forgiven for not noticing what appear to be the points of a crown and under it, almost invisible in the glorious surroundings, what at first sight seems to be a comatose animal. This insignificant creature is easily missed as our attention is caught by other aspects of the image.

What John saw was ‘the Lamb who was slain’ and that enabled him to understand the meaning of the words ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered’. But the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the King Messiah, turns out to be a weak, dead creature, and the values of the world are turned upside down.

Christopher Rowland

Note:
Further information about the immensely rich tradition of illustrations to Revelation, from the earliest centuries down to the present time, may be found in the excellent new volume, *Picturing the Apocalypse, The Book of Revelation in the Arts over Two Millennia*, by Natasha O'Hear and Anthony O'Hear, Oxford, OUP, 2015.

PB
Who’s who?

**Anthony Bowen** is a former Orator of the University and Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College. He has been busy with Greek plays since his schooldays.

**Patrick Boyde**, Emeritus Professor of Italian, has adapted and directed a dozen and more plays in Ancient Greek since 2005.

**Giulia Sara Corsino** is a visiting PhD student in Ancient Philosophy in the Faculty of Classics and a PhD student at the Scuola Normale di Pisa. She comes from Sicily.

**Gillian Jondorf** is a modern linguist who has composed the surtitles for all the Ancient Greek semi-staged productions in this theatre.

**Ed Liebrecht** is a first-year undergraduate, reading Music at Jesus College.

**Alesia Preite** is a Philosophy Master’s student in Pavia. She is spending an Erasmus-year in Cambridge, working on Ancient Philosophy.

**Reuben Thomas** was a chorister, volunteer, choral scholar and lay clerk in the Chapel choir between 1982 and 2003. He is now a lay clerk at Westminster Cathedral, and devotes his spare time to miscellaneous techno-musico-literary pursuits.

**Christos Tsirogiannis** took his PhD from Hughes Hall. He is a Greek forensic archaeologist specialising in the research and repatriation of illicit antiquities.

**Giles Waller** is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Faculty of Divinity. His first degree was in Theology at Peterhouse. His doctoral thesis is on theology and the tragic.

**James Willetts** used to be Principal Teacher of Classics at Ardrossan Academy and is now a documentary film maker. He will be filming the performance.

**Liz Willetts** is a writer. She has a PhD in English Literature. She assists with the photography and filming.

**Oliver Vibrans** is in his third year, reading Music at St John's. He has made a speciality of composing music for the theatre.

**Martin Worthington** is a lecturer in Assyriology in the Division of Archaeology. Raised in Italy, he dabbles in languages and day-dreams of writing a novel.