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SEX AND BLOOD:
SOME NEW APPROACHES TO THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN.

Useful texts:

- ADAM Andrew K., *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?*, Minneapolis 1995
FABBRO Franco, *Destra e sinistra nella Bibbia. Uno studio neuropsicologico*, Rimini (Guaraldi) 1995
HALPERIN David J., *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision*, Tübingen 1988
HALPERIN David J., *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology*, University Park PA, 1993
PIPPIN Tina, *Death and Desire, The Rethoric of Gendre in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation), Louisville 1992
PIPPIN Tina, *Peering into the Abyss: A Postmodern Reading of the Biblical Bottomless Pit*, in E. S. Malbon - E. V. McKnight (ed), *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (JSNT, Sup S 109), Sheffield 1994, 251-267
RAGUSE Hartmut, *Psychoanalyse und biblische Interpretation. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Eugen Drewermanns Auslegung der Johannes-Apokalypse*, Stuttgart 1993

0. Introduction.

My contribution deals basically with postmodernity [ADAM] and multiple approaches to an ancient religious text like the *Apocalypse*. My fundamental question is whether the cases I discuss here really do bring something new into the discussion, and, if so, in which measure they do it (it is certain that incommunicability was not discovered by postmodernity: when Gorgias proclaimed that we do not communicate essence, but words, he already had

clear the theoretical problems that lie beneath postmodern attitudes). I will not discuss here those radical postmodern positions, which bring the research to nihilistic or absolutely relativistic issues. I will discuss some of the aspects of postmodern works which stand in (polemical) dialogue with traditional modern thought.

Even from the point of view of modern approach, the extreme interdisciplinarity of postmodern times has brought interesting and stimulating fresh attitudes. I will cite here as an example the book of FABBRO, which contains a neuropsychological interpretation of the opposition between "right" and "left" in the Bible. The possibility of thinking of a neurological basis for theological and scripturistical issues is fascinating.

But how postmodern is psychoanalytical exegesis? And what about feminism?

1: Psychoanalysis.

The first question we have to face is "Which psychoanalysis?". As Jungism itself is very close to becoming a sort of religious thought, I will remain in the realm of the freudian school, which aims at presenting itself as the "scientific" dimension of psychology. The first example of FREUDIAN psychoanalytical exegesis is quite famous: the explanation of the swallowing of the "flying scroll" (Ez. 3,1-3; cfr. Apoc. 10,8-10) [HALPERIN, 1993]. The scroll is a phallic symbol and the hallucination(s) described in the Bible is (are) the projection of a sexual oral violence, suffered by the prophet(s) during his (their) infancy. It is not clear to me if Freudian psycho-exegetes think that both Ezekiel and John were orally violated during their infancy and both produced the same kind of hallucination. In any case, the interpretation is based on an exegesis of both passages which is obviously wrong, as it does not take into consideration what the text itself says: the scrolls (flying or in the hand of an angelomorphic figure) are unrolled (Ez. 2,9; Apoc. 10,8). Just as the "flying scroll" of Zech. 5,1-2 is not a gigantic phallus (20 cubits in length, 10 cubits in breadth), but is similar to a large "flying carpet" (and some Qumran scrolls are not shorter than that), in the same way the scrolls of Ez. and Apoc. look like sheets or leaves, not penises. Additionally, Jewish scrolls, on untanned parchment of split skin, were renowned for their thinness and softness (so the Letter of Aristeas and many rabbinical statements; the softness of the scrolls may be connected to the absence of tannic acid in the preparation of the skins, which is probably the reason for the fact that the scrolls of Qumran, which are not impermeable because of such absence, are so frail). Therefore there is no way for the image to be phallic.

This kind of exegesis, far from being postmodern, depends heavily on modern exegesis: if this is wrong or if it is possible to choose another interpretation, the psychoanalytical reading can collapse. What remains is the projection of our way of thinking on the text.

I will now propose a series of examples taken from the book of RAGUSE.

- The words καὶ ἰδοὺ show the involvement of the user (reader or listener) of the text, thanks to the presence of a form of the verb ἰδεῖν. The exhortation to "look" at what is happening in the vision has both psychological and ecclesiological meanings [cfr. also R. Karrer, *Die Johannesoffenbarung als Brief*, Göttingen 1986]. But at the time of John ἰδοὺ did not mean "Look!" at all. It had already lost that meaning a couple of centuries before and the connection with the verb ἰδεῖν was purely phonetic.

- The fact that the heavenly Jerusalem is a cube (of more than 2000 kms per side) shows its perfection in Apoc. 21,16. Additionally, while light and life are inside, outside of it there is only "a sea of fire". This last assertion collides with Apoc 21,24, where there is a "living outside", difficult to explain theologically, but nevertheless present in the text. Concerning the form of Jerusalem, the idea that it is cubic is a modern mistake (Jerusalem is a square city which lies on a high mountain), but in any case there is no trace in the antique world of the idea that the cube is a sign of perfection. The word κύβος means basically "die", which could be connected only with difficulty to any idea of perfection. The fact that Methodius speaks of cubic resurrected bodies, when he tries to ridicule Origen's ideas on spheric bodies, shows that no idea of perfection was tied to the cubic form.

- The Lamb is a "phallic symbol", like the throne and God himself. I recognize that this could also contribute in explaining why John insists in saying that the Lamb "stands", but it is difficult to understand his enthronization. Is that a form of identification of the Lamb with the throne (being both angelomorphic figures)? Otherwise, how can a phallic symbol "be seated" on another phallic symbol? It seems to me that RAGUSE never takes into consideration the fact that the Lamb is slaughtered. A slaughtered phallic symbol is quite worrisome. Is this another case of the Christian-filial masochism many psychoanalysts speak of? Or could it be a projection of the early trauma caused by circumcision? I know no research on early traumas presumably caused by circumcision.

- The bride (Jerusalem) has a maternal dimension even if there are no textual indications in that direction. RAGUSE thinks that words like "bride" and "woman" have a maternal connotation *per se*. This allows him to see in the wedding and the marriage of the Lamb (who is the Son) with the bride-

mother the solution of the Oedipal problem of John and his readers. If we read the *Apocalypse*, we see that Jezabel and the woman of chapter 12, both have children; the prostitute of chapter 17 is the only woman which is said to be "mother" (17,5), while the bride is the only female figure in the book without children or maternal connotation. In any case, if the word "woman" implies maternity, shouldn't the word "man" imply paternity? The only figure which is indirectly said to be "man" (ἀνὴρ) is the Lamb-bridegroom (21,2). In the context of the wedding, the masculinity of the Lamb appears, more than his filiality.

The four examples I chose show either a strong derivation from errors of modern exegetes or, where the postmodern approach is more evident, an impressive weakness in their coherence with the text. RAGUSE is perfectly aware of the fact that the text is just a pretext. The exegete brings into discussion his con-texts and pre-texts; the original text is lost and its content becomes indifferent. A clear example of this way of working is his analysis of the killing of the prostitute in Apoc. 17. Not only does the scene show sadistic perversions; it depicts "murder, *sodomy*, drunkenness and prostitution". The sexuality in the passage is *fecalized*. Sexuality in the heavenly Jerusalem is denied; similarly that of the whore is "perversion, regression, *analness*". RAGUSE is again aware that these meanings do not emerge explicitly from the text, but - he says - the text *allows* such an interpretation. In any way, he is convinced that genital sexuality is excluded from both marriages, that of the Lamb with the heavenly Jerusalem and that of the beast with the prostitute, this last being only *anal perversion* (then he goes on in a discussion on paradise as uterus and on hell as intestine).

I put in italics what seems to be the personal contribution of RAGUSE; it is difficult indeed to find in the text any sodomitic dimension. Apoc. 17,16 might be the result of sadistic phantasies and not only a quotation of Ezechiel, but where is the analness? The relationship of the prostitute with the beast is presumably bestial and antitypical, but it is quite hard to imagine the beast having anal sex with the prostitute (and the contrary would be simply ridiculous). RAGUSE does not quote in this context the only passage of Apoc. where Sodom appears: Apoc. 11,8, where "the great city, where their Lord was crucified", is identified with "Sodom and Egypt". For him, the "great city" of Chapter 11 and the "great city" of Chapter 17 are two different cities and their identification does not seem to fit into his theory. In any case, I would like to stress that the "sin of Sodom" is probably not sodomy at all. The explanation can be found in Iud. 6-7 where we can see that, in an ideal context tied to enochic apocalypticism, the sin of the Sodomites is the hu-

man answer to the sin of the angels. As the angels desired the flesh of the women, so the Sodomites desired the flesh of the angels: this is idolatry (the fallen angels are the pagan gods).

If we project our perversions on an ancient text, at the end we rediscover our disturbances of men living at the end of the 20th Century. This can be clinically useful, but such an analysis can be criticized in the same way postmodernity criticizes modern approaches.

2. Feminism.

Also interesting appear the questions raised by the feminist approach. How can a cultivated woman at the end of 20th Century read a text like the *Apocalypse*, where female figures are either mothers or prostitutes or brides (or sources of contamination and analogous to demonic aspects)? The text is an invitation to female believers to accept a masculinistic ideology; with whom can a female reader of the *Apocalypse* identify herself? Female figures are basically silent; Jezabel speaks and must be silenced. Either we find an antagonism which leads to the destruction of the female counterpart, or we have subordination and/or passiveness.

These and similar propositions can be found in the works of PIPPIN, a typical example of that postmarxism which seems to have emerged in the American universities after the fall of the Berlin wall (as Communism does not seem dangerous any more, MARXISTIC approaches find a larger audience in the United States). Her approach is characteristically postmodern: the original authors, readers, texts are lost, always and forever. The only possible reading is now a cathartical participation. The identification is possible with the Lamb, who is slaughtered-winner. Therefore it is possible for the oppressed to consider the acquisition of power (at least now, not necessarily in the 1st century A.D.). The aspect of the text which is still valid is its revolutionary tension.

Therefore the political interpretation is the most valid. The *Apocalypse* speaks of the liberation of a colonized people. The dominating power is represented symbolically by the female body which is going to be destroyed in the great ritual murder of Chapter 17. In this case, the language of the *Apocalypse* is no more a mysterious code, but it becomes clear and evident. Nevertheless, what the text does not say is as important as and even more important than what it says. The exegete must become a detective. We must identify the contradictions in the text: the bipolar oppositions reveal repressed political unconsciousness. As an example we can look at the two opposite

women (of Chapters 12 and 17) who represent opposite political, social and economical issues (in the same way as the pain of labor is opposed to the orgasmic orgasm).

This first series of assertions deserves some preliminary comment. Apart from the methodological difficulties of analysing the silences of a text, we must note that the *Apocalypse* is a mysterious text, which immediately becomes clear and needs no more explanation when it seems to support the political ideas of the exegete. All this is very suspicious. Again, as in the case of RAGUSE, the two women must be two antithetic (politically, socially, economically) cities: if they both represent Judaism or Jerusalem (before and after the corruption), the whole interpretation collapses. It is worth noticing that where the German male theologian and psychoanalyst noticed only analness and sodomy, the American feminist sees orgasm (PIPPIN even parallels the screams of birth of chapter 12 with the moans and groans of the orgasm of the prostitute - again these are not in the text, but this seems to be a minor aspect).

The opposition of female figures is not the most important characteristic of the attitudes of the text towards women: it is misogyny. This obliges the feminist exegete to adopt the so-called hermeneutic of the suspect. Indeed, in the *Apocalypse* only males are in the camp with the Lamb: the text is liberating in politics, but not in its policy of gender. It is a male-oriented construction that needs to be undermined. All its women either are marginalized (even the woman of Chapter 12 ends up in exile in the desert, where she disappears) or are sexual objects exploited and raped (Jezabel, the whore, the bride). All the women of the text are victims and the *Apocalypse* must be decolonized in a feminist sense.

Can a female reader identify herself with the misogynic ideal of the text? Can a woman desire to marry the bride? The ideal of the text is that of male winners: to kill the woman-enemy and to share in the spoils of war. Women are invited to read as if they were men a male myth (which involves entering into the heavenly Jerusalem - the bride, and coming out of Babylon - the whore).

PIPPIN explains the astonishment of John at 17,7 as the desire of the male who contemplates the erotic power of the woman. In the course of the vision, then, the sexual desire turns into desire of death and ends in a sexual murder. This could be a fascinating reconstruction, but there is no wording in the text that involves concepts like "desire" or similar. Even the killing of the prostitute is the act of the beast and the kings, that is of negative and

demonic powers. It is the "enemies" who kill the prostitute, not the Lamb or the army of angels and saints. Nor do the Lamb or his army share in the spoils of the prostitute: the Lamb and the prostitute have the same enemies. How this can fit into the interpretation of PIPPIN is hard to say.

Also PIPPIN says that the desire (which is not in the text) is then transferred on to the bride, who is "virgin" and will become a mother. For the maternity of the bride we can only repeat what we said commenting the work of RAGUSE, but concerning her virginity we see that in the *Apocalypse* only men are virgin (14,4). This should be a sign of the deep misogyny of the text (women cannot be virgin); the virginity of the bride may be auspicious in our way of thinking (quite traditional, I would say), but it may be contrary to the misogynic ideal of John.

A last point of interest can be found in the observation that the *Apocalypse* is a sort of Utopia without women: there are no women in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is true, even if women are not in the categories which are explicitly excluded from the City in 22,15 (dogs and various sinners). As a contrast we can read the Qumranic text of 4Q491, where we found the traditional exclusion of minors, women, impure persons... Also PIPPIN admits that perhaps John did not really think of excluding women, but the absence of an explicit inclusion is already meaningful. I would add that also the absence of minors should be considered: could John really think of excluding children and young people from the heavenly Jerusalem? To our personal edification, then, we should reflect on the not-mentioning of handicapped, minorities, homosexuals and other groups of underrepresented humanity. We should also try not to forget that John lived in the I Century A.D. and not on a contemporary American campus.

To conclude this quick overview on some postmodern approaches to the *Apocalypse*, I would like to underline how postmodernity is being strongly opposed now in different fields, such as the medical sciences. Traditional (modern) physicians contest not only (or not so much) homoeopathy, but the so-called New Age medicine, based on music, colours, smells, stones etc. In these cases postmodernity represent the reemerging of pre-modernity. The same happens with theology, where the attack against historical criticism is led by conservative and even reactionary theologians: neo-creationism is "in" in many Christian groups, churches and movements. Postmodernity became a weapon in the hands of Christian fundamentalism.

This, in my opinion, is a dangerous situation. It is necessary to re-found modern criticism and prepare a neo-modernity which could seriously help mankind entering the third Christian millennium. Concerning Biblical ex-

egesis, we should face texts and problems with a global, holistic and interdisciplinary approach, which treasures postmodern criticism. If it is true that the absolute is unattainable, it is also true that there is a human dimension where communication and understanding are possible. In the ideal space delimited by human possibilities, even an ancient text is understandable and its author can be approached. This rediscovery of a livable human dimension should allow us to finally go beyond the age of the *post*.

BARBARA MICHALAK - PIKULSKA

GIBRAN KHALIL GIBRAN'S SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE
IN ARABIC AND WORLD LITERATURE
AND HIS CREATIVE RECEPTION IN THE WORLD.

Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883 - 1931) - the Lebanese prose writer, poet, painter and publicist - belongs to the most eminent of Arab creators of the turn of the twentieth century. The position achieved by the author of 'The Prophet' in world literature results, primarily, from the originality and universality of his outlook. His life was led on the border of two diametrically different cultures: brought up in the East he was to spend the majority of his life in the United States. He made use of both. He drew equally from cultural literary output through his equal fascination for the personality of Friedrich Nietzsche and the works of William Blake, as from the philosophy and mysticism of the Arab East, from figures of the magnitude of Ibn Al-Muqaffa or Ibn Sīnā. He loved the Arabic language, was its master and reformer. Equally his English works secured him the acclaim of critics and readers.

Within the pages of the 'Springfield Union' there appeared the following note: 'Gibran's English is characterised by beauty and clarity. He has achieved in this way a perfection which could serve as inspiration for other writers, for whom English is their native language'.¹

All Gibran's book publications and articles constitute a single, long chain of works, linked with each other in their entirety. The first of these links is the essay 'Music' (Al-Mūsīqā) and the last the poem 'The Wanderer', published admittedly posthumously although personally supervised for publication. This is the view point of Mikha'il Nu'aym, friend as well as the writer's biographer, together with the Lebanese poet and critic Jamil Jabr, who specialises in Gibran Khalil's artistic achievements.

¹ Barbara Young, *This Man from Lebanon. A Study of Kahlil Gibran*, New York 1977, pp. 36-37.