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THE BIG REVEAL

Why does the Bible end that way?



By Adam Gopnik

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The Bible, as every Sunday-school student learns, has a Hollywood ending. Not a happy ending, certainly, but one where all the dramatic plot points left open earlier, to the whispered uncertainty of the audience (“I don’t get it—*when* did he say he was coming back?”), are resolved in a rush, and a final, climactic confrontation between the stern-lipped action hero and the really bad guys takes place. That ending—the Book of Revelation—has every element that Michael Bay could want: dragons, seven-headed sea beasts, double-horned land beasts, huge C.G.I.-style battles involving hundreds of thousands of angels and demons, and even, in Jezebel the temptress, a part for Megan Fox. (“And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.”) Although Revelation got into the canonical Bible only by the skin of its teeth—it did poorly in previews, and was buried by the Apostolic suits until one key exec favored its release—it has always been a pop hit. Everybody reads Revelation; everybody gets excited about it; and generations of readers have insisted that it might even be telling the truth about what’s coming for Christmas.

In a new book on those end pages, “Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation” (Viking), Elaine Pagels sets out gently to bring their portents back to earth. She accepts that Revelation was probably written, toward the end of the first century C.E., by a refugee mystic named John on the little island of Patmos, just off the coast of modern Turkey. (Though this John was not, she insists, the disciple John of Zebedee, whom Jesus loved, or the author of the Gospel that bears the same name.) She neatly synthesizes the spectacular action. John, finding himself before the Throne of God, sees a lamb, an image of Christ, who receives a scroll sealed by seven seals. The seals are broken in order, each revealing a mystical vision: a hundred and forty-four thousand “firstfruits” eventually are saved as servants of God—the famous “rapture.” Seven trumpets then sound, signalling various catastrophes—stars fall, the sun darkens, mountains

explode, those beasts appear. At the sound of the sixth trumpet, two hundred million horsemen annihilate a third of mankind. This all leads to the millennium—not the end of all things but the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth—which, in turn, finally leads to Satan’s end in a lake of fire and the true climax. The Heaven and Earth we know are destroyed, and replaced by better ones. (There are many subsidiary incidents along the way, involving strange bowls and that Whore of Babylon, but they can be saved, so to speak, for the director’s cut on the DVD.)

Pagels then shows that Revelation, far from being meant as a hallucinatory prophecy, is actually a coded account of events that were happening at the time John was writing. It’s essentially a political cartoon about the crisis in the Jesus movement in the late first century, with Jerusalem fallen and the Temple destroyed and the Saviour, despite his promises, still not back. All the imagery of the rapt and the raptured and the rest that the “Left Behind” books have made a staple for fundamentalist Christians represents contemporary people and events, and was well understood in those terms by the original audience. Revelation is really like one of those old-fashioned editorial drawings where Labor is a pair of overalls and a hammer, and Capital a bag of money in a tuxedo and top hat, and Economic Justice a woman in flowing robes, with a worried look. “When John says that ‘the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth,’ he revises Daniel’s vision to picture Rome as the worst empire of all,” Pagels writes. “When he says that the beast’s seven heads are ‘seven kings,’ John probably means the Roman emperors who ruled from the time of Augustus until his own time.” As for the creepy 666, the “number of the beast,” the original text adds, helpfully, “Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person.” This almost certainly refers—by way of Gematria, the Jewish numerological system—to the contemporary Emperor Nero. Even John’s vision of a great mountain exploding is a topical reference to the recent eruption of Vesuvius, in C.E. 79. Revelation is a highly colored picture of the present, not a prophecy of the future.

What's more original to Pagels's book is the view that Revelation is essentially an anti-Christian polemic. That is, it was written by an expatriate follower of Jesus who wanted the movement to remain within an entirely Jewish context, as opposed to the "Christianity" just then being invented by St. Paul, who welcomed uncircumcised and trayf-eating Gentiles into the sect. At a time when no one quite called himself "Christian," in the modern sense, John is prophesying what would happen if people did. That's the forward-looking worry in the book. "In retrospect, we can see that John stood on the cusp of an enormous change—one that eventually would transform the entire movement from a Jewish messianic sect into 'Christianity,' a new religion flooded with Gentiles," Pagels writes. "But since this had not yet happened—not, at least, among the groups John addressed in Asia Minor—he took his stand as a Jewish prophet charged to keep God's people holy, unpolluted by Roman culture. So, John says, Jesus twice warns his followers in Asia Minor to beware of 'blasphemers' among them, 'who say they are Jews, and are not.' They are, he says, a 'synagogue of Satan.' " Balaam and Jezebel, named as satanic prophets in Revelation, are, in this view, caricatures of "Pauline" Christians, who blithely violated Jewish food and sexual laws while still claiming to be followers of the good rabbi Yeshua. Jezebel, in particular—the name that John assigns her is that of an infamous Canaanite queen, but she's seen preaching in the nearby town of Thyatira—suggests the women evangelists who were central to Paul's version of the movement and anathema to a pious Jew like John. She is the original shiksa goddess. ("When John accuses 'Balaam' and 'Jezebel' of inducing people to 'eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication,' he might have in mind anything from tolerating people who engage in incest to Jews who become sexually involved with Gentiles or, worse, who marry them," Pagels notes.) The scarlet whores and mad beasts in Revelation are the Gentile followers of Paul—and so, in a neat irony, the spiritual ancestors of today's Protestant evangelicals.

Pagels shows persuasively that the Jew/non-Jew argument over the future of the Jesus movement, the real subject of Revelation, was much fiercer than later

Christianity wanted to admit. The first-century Jesus movement was torn apart between Paul's mission to the Gentiles—who were allowed to follow Jesus without being circumcised or eating kosher—and the more strictly Jewish movement tended by Jesus' brothers in Jerusalem. The Jesus family was still free to run a storefront synagogue in Jerusalem devoted to his cult, and still saw the Jesus or "Yeshua" movement within the structure of dissenting Judaisms, all of which suggests the real tone of the movement in those first-century years—something like the gingerly, ambiguous, now-he-is, now-he-isn't messianic claims of the Lubavitchers' Menachem Schneerson movement, in Brooklyn. "On one side are movement officials who say the promotion of Judaism throughout the world is the heart of continuing Schneerson's work," the *Washington Post* reported several years ago. "On the other are the messianists, whose passion is preparing the world for the coming of Schneerson himself. They are two distinct missions from within one movement—each in the name of the same man." Apparently, when you have made up your mind to believe that your rabbi is God, neither death nor disappearance will discourage you. His presence is proof; his non-presence is proof; and non-presence can be conjured into presence by wishing it to be so. ("At recent Sabbath services, an older woman along the front row of the women's section smiled and pointed to the chair. 'He is Moshiach,' she said, using the Hebrew word for messiah. 'We can't see him with our eyes, but that doesn't mean he's not here. He is.") The two approaches—the Pauline, which says he's already here in our visions; the "Johannine," which says he'll come back if we stay true to our practice—seem to be the pillars of any messianic movement.

Pagels is an absorbing, intelligent, and eye-opening companion. Calming and broad-minded here, as in her earlier works, she applies a sympathetic and subtly humane eye to texts that are neither subtle nor sympathetically humane but lit instead by schismatic fury. Yet the project of draining the melodrama from Revelation may scant some significant things even as it draws attention to others. It is possible to draw too sharp a boundary between prophetic and merely symbolic images, between mad vision and coded cartoon. Allegorical pictures of

contemporary events have a way of weaving in and out between the symbolic and the semi-psychotic. This is close to an eternal truth of art: one person's editorial cartoon is another's weird nightmare. James Gillray, the late-eighteenth-century English cartoonist, meant his gallery of grotesques—armed skeletons and demonic imps and Brobdingnagian heads—as satiric images of contemporary British politics, but they became the image pool for Goya's "Caprichos." Even if there is some twist of satire to every wacky turn in Revelation, the writer's appetite for lurid imagery—the prophetic side we sense in it—is surely part of the book's intended effect.

Pagels may also underestimate the audience appeal of pure action: it's possible for a popular narrative to be susceptible to an allegorical reading and still be engaging mostly for its spectacle. Some patient academic of the future will, on seeing "Transformers 2," doubtless find patterns of local topical meaning—portents of the Arab Spring in the fight over the pyramids, evidence of the debate over the future of the automobile industry, and a hundred other things. But people just like violent otherworldly stuff, and give it a lot of non-allegorical license to do its thing. The fact that a religious book has a code in it doesn't mean that it doesn't also have an aura around it. Spiritual texts are the original transformers; they take mundane descriptions of what's going on and make them twelve feet tall and cosmic and able to knock down pyramids.

After decoding Revelation for us, Pagels turns away from the canonic texts to look at the alternative, long-lost "Gnostic" texts of the period that have turned up over the past sixty years or so, most notably in the buried Coptic library of Nag Hammadi. As in her earlier books ("The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis"; "The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters"; "The Gnostic Gospels"), she shows us that revelations in the period were not limited to John's militant, vengeful-minded one, and that mystic visions more provocative and many-sided were widespread in the early Jesus movement.

As an alternative revelation to John's, she focusses on what must be the single most astonishing text of its time, the long feminist poem found at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and called "Thunder, Perfect Mind"—a poem so contemporary in feeling that one would swear it had been written by Ntozake Shange in a feminist collective in the nineteen-seventies, and then adapted as a Helen Reddy song. In a series of riddling antitheses, a divine feminine principle is celebrated as transcending all principles (the divine woman is both whore and sibyl) and opening the way toward a true revelation of the hidden, embracing goddess of perfect being who lies behind all things:

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin.

I am the mother and the daughter.

I am the members of my mother.

I am the barren one

and many are her sons.

I am she whose wedding is great,

and I have not taken a husband.

I am the midwife and she who does not bear.

I am the solace of my labor pains.

I am the bride and the bridegroom . . .

Why, you who hate me, do you love me,

and hate those who love me?

You who deny me, confess me,

and you who confess me, deny me.

You who tell the truth about me, lie about me,
and you who have lied about me, tell the truth about me.

Astonishingly, the text of this mystic masterpiece was—a bit of YouTube viewing reveals—recently used by Ridley Scott as the background narration for a gorgeous long-form ad for Prada perfumes. The Gnostic strophes, laid over the model's busy life, are meant to suggest the Many Mystifying Moods of the Modern Woman, particularly while she's changing from one Prada outfit to another in the back seat of a sedan. (One feels that one should disapprove, but surely the Gnostic idea of the eternal feminine antitheses is meant to speak to the complicated, this-and-that condition of actually being a woman at any moment, and why not in Prada as well as in a flowing white robe?)

Pagels's essential point is convincing and instructive: there were revelations all over Asia Minor and the Holy Land; John's was just one of many, and we should read it as such. How is it, then, that this strange one became canonic, while those other, to us more appealing ones had to be buried in the desert for safekeeping, lest they be destroyed as heretical? Revelation very nearly did not make the cut. In the early second century, a majority of bishops in Asia Minor voted to condemn the text as blasphemous. It was only in the three-sixties that the church council, under the control of the fiery Athanasius, inserted Revelation as the climax of the entire New Testament. As a belligerent controversialist himself, Pagels suggests, Athanasius liked its belligerently controversial qualities. "Athanasius reinterpreted John's vision of cosmic war to apply to the battle that he himself fought for more than forty-five years—the battle to establish what he regarded as 'orthodox Christianity' against heresy," she writes. John's synagogue of Satan came to stand for all the Arians and other heretics who disagreed with Athanasius, and John's take-no-prisoners tone was congenial to a bishop who intended to take no prisoners. Once the Roman Empire had become the Church's best friend, the enemy in Revelation had to be sought elsewhere. Only a few years earlier, the Emperor Constantine, Athanasius' sometime ally, decided that, in the words of

Eusebius, “certain people had to be eliminated from humanity like a poison.” The Jews whose purity John had originally been campaigning for now became “killers of the prophets, and the murderers of the Lord.”

Perhaps what most strikes the naïve reader of the Book of Revelation is what a close-run thing the battle is. When God finally gets tired of waiting it out and decides to end things, the back-and-forth between dragons and serpents and sea monsters and Jesus is less like a scouring of the stables than like a Giants-Patriots Super Bowl. It seems that Manichaeism—bad god vs. good god—is the natural religion of mankind and that all faiths bend toward the Devil, to make sense of God’s furious impotence. A god omniscient and omnipotent and also powerless to stop evil remains a theological perplexity, even as it becomes a prop of faith. It gives you the advantage of clarity—only one guy worth worshipping—at the loss of lucidity: if he’s so great, why is he so weak?

You can’t help feeling, along with Pagels, a pang that the Gnostic poems, so much more affecting in their mystical, pantheistic rapture, got interred while Revelation lives on. But you also have to wonder if there ever was a likely alternative. Don’t squishy doctrines of transformation through personal illumination always get marginalized in mass movements? As Stephen Batchelor has recently shown, the open-minded, non-authoritarian side of Buddhism, too, quickly succumbed to its theocratic side, gasping under the weight of those heavy statues. The histories of faiths are all essentially the same: a vague and ambiguous millennial doctrine preached by a charismatic founder, Marx or Jesus; mystical variants held by the first generations of followers; and a militant consensus put firmly in place by the power-achieving generation. Bakunin, like the Essenes, never really had a chance. The truth is that punitive, hysterical religions thrive, while soft, mystical ones must hide their scriptures somewhere in the hot sand.

John of Patmos’s hatred for the pagan world extended from its cruelties to its beauties—the exquisite temple at nearby Pergamon was for him the Devil’s Altar,

worthy only of destruction. For all that, Pagels tells us, many claim to have found in John “the promise, famously repeated by Martin Luther King Jr., that the ‘arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’ . . . This worst of all nightmares ends not in terror but in a glorious new world, radiant with the light of God’s presence, flowing with the water of life, abounding in joy and delight.” Well, yeah, but this happens only after all the millions of heretics, past and present, have been burned alive and the planet destroyed. That’s some long arc. It’s like the inevitable moment in an apocalyptic blockbuster, “Independence Day” or “Armageddon” or “2012,” when the stars embrace and celebrate their survival. The Hans Zimmer music swells, and we’re reassured that it’s O.K. to rejoice. Millions are annihilated, every major city has been destroyed, but nobody you really *like* has died. It’s a Hollywood ending in that way, too. ♦

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