1. Divinity and Pseudo-divinity

'The book of Revelation is not only theocentric; it is also theological. In other words, it does not take for granted who God is; it embodies profound reflection on who God is . . . No one who shares Revelation's vision of God and understands who this God really is could ever again be tempted to worship the beast'.[1]

(R. Bauckham)

In the Book of Revelation, God reveals himself. This happens progressively in the course of an account of the story of God and the Lamb and of their adversaries. In the two chapters which follow this one, I will concentrate my attention first on the activity of each of these characters, whether divine or pseudo-divine (chapter. 2), turning subsequently to the true worship deserved by the former and to the idolatry inspired by the latter (chapter. 3). For an initial reading of this story-line, however, the current chapter aims to provide an introductory character study of the various protagonists and antagonists, doing so within the framework of a dual theme which is here explored: the divinity which God and the Lamb share; and the rival, pseudo-divinity which a dragon and two associate monsters claim.

Since this will be readers' first thematic journey through the whole of Revelation, I suggest that it is best undertaken (because it can thereby be substantiated) with the text of Revelation open in front of you. The same goes for forthcoming chapters. Throughout, sub-titles indicating the relevant chapter(s) of Revelation should help readers keep their bearings.

Revelation 1

Right from its opening sentence Revelation asks its reader to take note of an intimate relationship between God, who makes the revelation, and Jesus Christ who receives it. Quite soon (in 4.1–5.14), twin pictures will give to this relationship a magnificently dramatic shape, depicting first the Seated One on the throne – the transcendent God and Creator, who has in his right hand the book of his will (4.1-11) – and then, emerging from that same throne, the Lamb who is Revelation's principal figure for Jesus Christ, the Redeemer capable of receiving the scroll from the hand of the Eternal One (5.1-14). Farther on in the complex story, Revelation will narrate how personified forces will come forth to oppose the Lamb and the Seated One on the throne, showing traits, intentions and behaviour which are systematically modelled on those that characterise their divine adversaries. It is barely an

exaggeration to describe Revelation as 'an allegory of God and of his work, nothing more!'[2] Everything related to God or to Jesus Christ, in the Book, will be also the object of one take-off after another: various aspects of the benevolent project of God and his Christ, on behalf of human beings, will be matched by a series of contrary indicators of malevolence that are satanic in inspiration and whose aim is to mimic the divine to the point of outright caricature. Thus, for a time God and his Lamb will be parodied, in detail after detail, by the anti-god dragon of chapter twelve and by the monstrous anti-christs which appear, like Siamese twins, in 13.1 and 13.11 respectively.

This double dramatisation of positive divine attributes and actions on the one hand and of their negative caricature on the other, begins to be seen in all its originality right from Revelation's opening chapter. Our author wastes no time in establishing a very close association between the two great positive figures that will be the focus of chapters. 4 and 5: the sovereignly-enthroned but somewhat passive divinity, and the One who is presented as the executor of his will, a slain but standing Lamb (Christ); throughout the plot these characters share one reign and deserve joint worship. Here at the outset the seven Churches to whom the revelation is sent are immediately greeted jointly by Jesus Christ, by the seven spirits and by God (1.4-5). In a theological variation upon the divine tetragram of Exod 3.14[3], God is described by means of a strange and original formula whose very repetition indicates its importance (1.4,8). Literally translatable using verbal nouns, as 'The Is, the Was and the Coming (One)', this bizarre expression makes an obvious grammatical error by being in the nominative, despite following a Greek preposition (*apo*, *on the part of*) that clearly takes the genitive case. But this is no faux pas. Instead, it is a deliberate stratagem for spelling out a key fact: God, and only God, can be the real subject; therefore, he is invariably nominative and his predicates, in defiance of grammar, are indeclinable!

The importance of this striking theological nominative should not be underestimated, given the extremely subtle role it will play later on. The formula recurs in 4.8, in what can be called a chronologically corrected version – 'The Was, the Is and the Coming (One) – which serves to echo another designation, 'thrice holy'. After that, it reappears in 11.17 alongside several references to God's almightiness, in a binary variant 'the Is and the Was' which seems to indicate that, by this juncture of the plot, God no longer needs to be designated as 'coming'. We meet it one last time in 16.5, in the form 'the Is, the Was [and] the Holy (One)', intelligible because 'the Holy (One)' has already been introduced in the interim (in 15.4). As if this positive new usage for designating God were not already striking enough, as a variable three-part phrase it will subsequently undergo an astonishing distortion that transforms it into a number of negative tri-partite formulae, all of which audaciously parody God. We will return to this later at some length.

First, though, we need to take note of the occurrence (in 1.5) of another three-part theological nominative, again following the preposition *apo*, which is

set in obvious parallel to the previous one – this time, in order to qualify Jesus Christ: he is 'the Faithful Witness, the First-born from among the dead and the Sovereign over earth's kings'. This parallelism between 1.4 and 1.5 adds a new dimension. Not only can the name of the God of the covenant, as revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3.14-15) and rendered by the Septuagint 'I am the Is', be paraphrased as 'the Is, the Was and the Coming (One)'. It may also be interpreted using three titles of Christ, who is called Witness, Risen One and Lord. Thus the 'Coming (One)' of 1.4 finds an exact correspondence in Jesus Christ who 'is coming' (1.7). As a result, when Exod 3.14 is once more evoked in 1.8 – this time borrowing from Exod 3.15 'the Lord God' – there is a certain ambiguity, for we aren't quite sure if only God is speaking or if in fact the Christ now speaks in concert with him; the latter possibility could certainly be inferred from the equivalence expressed in the very next verse, in the phrase 'the Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus' (1.9).

As chapter one proceeds, still more titles are used to reinforce, for readers, the great degree of proximity or even identity between God and Christ which the rest of the book will take for granted. In 1.8 two additional appellations for God occur: 'the Alpha and the Omega' and 'the Almighty'. The first of these will be picked up again in 21.6, when God is also described as 'the Beginning and the End'. The second is one of Revelation's favourite ways of talking about God (4.8; 11.17; 15.3; 16.7,14; 19.6,15; 21.22). In 1.17 'the Alpha and the Omega' is paired with a synonymous formula which the Risen One uses to refer to himself and which will be used of no one else in the entire Book: '(I am) the First and the Last'. It leaps out at us from the page that this is a formal parallel with 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' (in 1.8). We should also realise that these equivalent ways of referring to God are not John's invention but something he has inherited from his predecessors, in particular Isaiah (Isa 44.6; 48.12, LXX; *cf.* 41.4; 43.11 and Deut 32.39). In Rev 22.13, where what was said about God from the start is repeated at the end of the book, the three equivalent binary expressions found in 1.8,17 and 21.6 are climactically combined to comprise a triple designation which describes Christ alone: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.'

A preliminary conclusion is in order. From the moment the curtain rises and until it falls, the Christ of Revelation is conspicuously presented as sharing God's identity. It will be important not to forget this, whenever other twosomes that appear in the course of the plot directly parody this privileged relationship without ever actually managing to reproduce it.

Assimilation of the Risen One to the divinity can be further seen in the way the stunning opening vision characterises him (1.9-20). The description takes the form of a theophany in which John, like Moses or Elijah before him, finds it unbearable to be in the presence of a figure with clearly divine attributes; this establishes the high dignity which the Christ shares with God and which will receive prolonged focus later in the twin-panelled picture of the Creator

and the Redeemer (4.11; 5.2,4,9,12). In 1.13-16 the elegant depiction of the figure of the Risen One suggests someone who possesses heavenly glory and who resembles God himself,[4] thus further expanding the parallelism, in use from the start,[5] between the ways of designating God (1.4) and Christ (1.5, perhaps also 1.8). A major given of the narrative, in all that follows, will be the strict unity that exists between God and his Christ – again something that this grandiose inaugural vision underlines. Whenever anti-christ figures try, in forthcoming episodes, to parody Christ in who he is or what he says and does, it is this very first representation of the real Christ, which also seems to be the most complete found anywhere in the Book,[6] that will enable the reader to observe how none of the counterfeits ever succeeds in bringing together more than a few of the elements which characterise him here on the threshold.

In 1.17-18 a few supplementary titular items are introduced by an 'I am' which balances that of 1.8 and once more recalls the 'I am' of Exod 3.14. By specifying that Christ possesses the keys of death and Hades, in other words that he rules over the very powers which he wrested from their grasp (Rom 14.8-9), the word-picture is asserting his prior domination of these same powers that will later be personified (in 6.8). To this first attribute others are then added. The 'Living One' conveys an implicit contrast with the dead or inanimate gods of paganism – for God is frequently described as 'the Living One' in both the Old Testament (Josh 3.10; Pss. 42.2; 84.3, *etc.*) and the New Testament (Mt. 16.16; Ac. 14.15; Rm. 9.26, etc.) – while at the same time anticipating the sea monster's apparent immortality which, in reality, is a sham (13.3,5). Then comes 'I was dead and look, I am the Living One from everlasting to everlasting'. This is a way of re-echoing deliverance through shed blood (in 1.5) spelling out what, in the apocalyptic plot, the slain but standing Lamb will soon embody and the wounded but healed beast will only disfigure. We should note, here, how the message to Smyrna incorporates a short but significant version of this portrayal of the Risen One ('who was dead but came to life', 2.8).[7]

One final element of the first chapter deserves our full attention. In 1.19 we find the expression 'what you see and what is and what will come about after that'. Noticing how the command to write (in 1.11) is here repeated and reasoning that 1.19 might therefore offer an explanation for what is to be written, many exegetes have thought that this verse provides a kind of table of contents which sheds light prospectively on the structure and contents of the Book as a whole. To my mind, however, this tri-partite construction is governed by another logic altogether, which also supplies its meaning. Modelled on the previous three-part formula in 1.4,8, but here 1.18 adding to the scope of Christ's titles in 1.18 (as in 1.5), this key expression is an invitation to the reader to take it as self-evident that God (and Christ) who is, was and is coming will remain present throughout Revelation's intrigues. Such a presupposition will be of vital importance for understanding the highs and lows of the plot. For example, however disturbing the reader might find the dragon and the monsters to be when they burst onto the scene, or however

impressive might appear the claims to independence that they make, at no point in their short career will they ever escape the divine sovereignty which covers all eventualities. Ultimate proof that this is indeed how we should read 1.19 will come in the shape of the triple titles given to Christ when he makes his final appearance at the very end of the book (22.13).

Revelation 2.1–3.22

So much, then, for the opening chapter. At this stage we will take only the briefest account of the septet of oracles to Churches (in 2.1–3.22), since I will come back to them at greater length later. In their headers, all seven oracles pick up from the opening vision (1.9-20) this or that characteristic of the Risen One who presides over the seven lampstands much as the OT priest watched over the menorah in the Temple. Accordingly, the introductions to the oracles to Churches are shot through with christological attributes. We may take the last of them (to Laodicea) as our example. In 3.14 mention of the Christ speaking as 'the Faithful Witness' directs our gaze not so much towards the splendid figure of the vision in 1.13*ff* as towards the Witness introduced from the very start (1.2,5)[8]. This is an *inclusio* marking the close of the first septet. After this, a different representation of the Risen One as the slain but standing Lamb will occupy centre stage from chapter 5 onwards. This in turn will provoke the emergence of a dark, blasphemous and ridiculous version of itself, split into two – in the form of two monsters which both undergo pseudo-healing plus their own fictive death and resurrection (13.3,12).

Arising out of the visions or auditions of 4.1-11 and 5.1-14 is the close association between God and the Lamb; this is in preparation right from the end of the communication to Laodicea. We have already taken note of the linkage of the two figures (in 1.4-5), but it is the developed treatment which this receives in chapters 4 and 5 that will elucidate for us the various inversely parallel combinations between the dragon and the twin monsters in chapters 12 and 13. In 3.21 the Victor *par excellence* declares how his death has entitled him to sit down with his Father on his throne; it is worth reminding ourselves that a statement made by Jesus before his death, in Lk 22.30,[9] parallels this promise of the Risen One. Things become more explicit still in 5.6,9 and the idea of sharing the same throne – 'God's throne and the Lamb's throne', as 22.1,3 will put it several times over – will again be called to mind in 7.10.[10] We may also note, in passing, how the notion of God and Christ sharing one throne will provide the blueprint for the joint enthronement of Christ and his followers. The throne seals Jesus's participation in the divine identity. As such, it is a cipher for a high christology and one of several elements which powerfully symbolise equivalence and which help explain why both God and the Lamb are worshipped in Revelation.[11] Their joint reign is consolidated in 21.22-23, where together God and the Lamb replace the Temple and shed their combined light on the holy city whose glory and illumination they are.

Revelation 4.1–5.14

At the very instant when our gaze leaves the Creator and catches sight of the Redeemer (4.11), the kingdom of the world is said to belong to God and, implicitly, to his Christ. To hear this stated explicitly we will have to await 11.15, but we can already detect it in the doxologies of 5.9,12 which hail the Lamb and correspond to the acclamation of God in 4.11.[12] This declaration is especially important since, as the plot proceeds, the whole universe will be put massively out of joint. Yet there is never any doubt that its only origin is in God, even though cosmic renewal and the descent of New Jerusalem are delayed until the denouement, as is the establishment of the divine presence with human beings once and for all (21.1-3).

From the moment the seer locks his gaze onto the Lamb emerging from the very centre of the throne (5.6), from the heart of the divinity who governs the universe, a certain pictorial tension takes hold at the core of the narrative. On the one hand there is a representation of equality, as symbolised by the throne shared by God and the Lamb (*cf.* 14.4), or by the Lord God and the Lamb (21.22). On the other, a certain pre-eminence is given to Christ dead and risen. Tension, here, does not however mean material contradiction and readers who know the Gospels are reminded of similar incongruity between Messiah sitting at God's right hand (Mt. 22.41-46; 26.64) and his enjoyment of an unheard-of entitlement to act as Judge,[13] which Jesus will do as Son of Man (Mt. 25.31ff). Another similar juxtaposition comes in Rev 6.16, where God looking out from his throne, or the Lamb showing anger, amount to the same thing – not that this identification prevents the reappearance of one like a Son of Man (1.13*ff*) for a second time, in 14.14.

When we take a closer look at this tension to see what creates it, it turns out first and foremost to be a simple matter of place. The reason is that the real arena for the action of the book, what we could call its topographic centre, is at the heart of the throne which functions as the epicentre of a universe that God fills with his presence.[14] Around this centre are clustered the various locations for the Book's successive scenes, some of them positioned *on earth* (in the cities of Roman Asia, on a mountain, outside the walls of Jerusalem or 'Babylon',[15] inside New Jerusalem . . .), some of them *in heaven* (in the celestial court, or Temple, or in front of its altar . . .) and even, as we move from one vision or audition to another, *alternately in heaven and on earth*. This space at the centre of all things, where the divine throne stands, provides the reader with an additional component for an interpretative framework into which to fit the various activities of maleficent forces that will appear later. These powers are deprived of any proximity to God and so, for anybody with eyes to see, what they perform are basically anti-actions played out, by the fake heroes they are, before a very peripheral *pseudo*-throne which they are ultimately forced to abandon.

Revelation 4 in counterpoint with Revelation 12

How do chapters 4 and 5 anticipate and prepare for the appearance, in due course, of these parodic entities?[16] The answer is, meticulously; it is now our task to explore this. We must first take cognisance of fundamental structural parallelism here. Chapter 4, with heaven opened, describes God in his otherness and underlines, much as the Jewish Scriptures do, that the Creator is ineffable and invisible. Chapter 12 then responds and corresponds to this with another celestial sign, namely that of a dragon with quasi-divine and quasi-messianic characteristics that antithetically reflect the shared traits of God and the Lamb. By extension, the description 'seven heads and ten horns and on its heads seven diadems' (in 12.3), will recur once the narrative needs to delineate the monster's attributes (in 13.1, where all the traits from 12.3 are re-used); at that point there is just a slight change of word order, with the addition 'and on its heads blasphemous names'. Clearly, the intention is to try to pair the dragon and the monster(s) to the same degree that God and the Lamb are united together. As far as the plot goes, the dragon and the sea monster make up a diabolical duo whose precise role is to act as the counterpart and, above all, the counterfeit of God and the Lamb.[17] Of course, even as their hellish alliance is inaugurated, the description of the dragon's failure in heaven (12.7-9) and its subsequent inability to destroy the woman or her male child on earth (12.13-17) together spell out for us that this is nothing but a show. Our ears are meant to pick up the little acclamation of God and his Christ carefully slipped in between the two incidents (12.10), that is, before ever the dragon can recruit two other monsters to whom to delegate its power (13.2,12). What this little hymn serves to recall is the invincible divine partnership which the ridiculous tandem of monsters may try to resemble but can only hope (in vain) to replace.

In short, a rival rears its head before God with a throne that parodies his, while Christ is confronted by another monster that shares the dragon's throne even as he, the Lamb, shares God's. The equivalence is striking, yet it is also simply without substance. The reader well knows that only the true Messiah may rise up to God and his throne (12.5), whereas the accuser and everything related to it has already been dashed into the abyss (12.10) – a locale that is home to the first monster which had proleptically emerged from it (in 11.7) and now reappears from the wings to take centre stage. Having fallen from heaven (12.12) the devil is now obliged, as we have seen, to seek assistance from a sea monster (13.1) followed by another from the land (13.11). In this way is constituted a sort of satanic anti-trinity which lays claims to a sovereignty over heaven, earth and sea (10.6) that belongs only to the Creator (chapter 4) and to his plenipotentiary, the Lamb (chapter 5). The correspondences between these two opposing 'teams' stretch to even the smallest details, as a few examples will easily demonstrate. First of all, when applied to malevolent forces 'seven' always parodies the divine.[18] Second, when the dragon casts stars onto the earth this activity is intended as an

imitation, however vain, of what God does. Thirdly, the blasphemous names in 13.1 are to be clearly distinguished from the hitherto unknown name of the royal Messiah (19.12) or from the title that no one can miss, 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (19.16). The elaborate antithetical parallelism in the description of these monsters, where everything opposes them to God and his Christ, hands us an interpretative key which helps us understand them as parodic entities. It explains the partial attempts at imitation by the one 'resembling a lamb'[19] (13.11), for in reality there is only One in the whole universe in whose person God's infiniteness and human finitude may or do come together: in the slain but standing Crucified One.

Revelation 5 in counterpoint with Revelation 13

The second part of our investigation brings us to chapter 5 and to its echo in chapter 13, where the same structural parallelism that we have just seen remains operative. Like every other motif of significance deployed here, the sealed book which the Lamb receives is a borrowing from Daniel 7.[20] The various elements are nonetheless adapted to a new context where the 'one like a Son of Man' (in the text that provides the model) has now been transformed into a Lamb. In Dn 7, 'one like a Son of Man' – implicitly a created being – presented himself before the Ancient of Days for an investiture to the messianic work that awaited him. Here, by contrast, it is obvious that the Lamb is endowed with patently divine attributes from the instant he makes his appearance. His place of origin can be located nowhere in the created universe, whether in heaven, earth or under the earth (5.3), for he emerges instead from the midst of the throne. The task that awaits him, and only him – involving the opening of a book – is beyond what any created being could undertake: we must conclude that his status and dignity are those of Lord of all creation and that, by taking the book, 'he emphasises that whatever he does, God does . . . from now on for knowing God, we will have to know the Lamb'.[21]

To sum up, then, several elements of the Lamb's characterisation from the moment he makes his entrance have been borrowed from a source text in prior revelation. That being said, what has exerted the most decisive influence on the description, at this point, is something brand new: the key designation 'standing there as if slain' (5.6).[22] To comprehend this we need to fast forward to the point (in 13.8) where the very same expression is used again, unchanged, to qualify the first of the dragon's subversive sidekicks and thus to set it in flagrant opposition to the Lamb. Within the confines of the literary world created by Revelation, we will see this monster mimic, in every respect, the Lamb already encountered. Its characterisation as anti-christ or anti-god results from the author's sophisticated use of a process of literary parody. The Lamb's portrait in 5.6 is therefore a skilful literary anticipation of his future antagonists' mimicry, before ever their satanic hijacking actually occurs in the later plot. Consequently, it makes perfect sense to see the traits

that define the anti-god squad of chapter 12 or the anti-lamb brigade in chapters 13 and 17 as having been 'chosen to correspond, in antithetical fashion, to Christ's portrait'.[23] Their only significance is negative because their only value is antithetical; in an artfully written work like this they serve to guarantee, from 5.6 onwards, that once readers encounter this partial caricature of God and the Lamb they will find it fully legible.

Quite possibly the ten diadems in 13.1 redeploy the image of the crowns in 9.7. At any rate they obviously pick up on those worn by the dragon usurper (12.3) as well as anticipating, in contrary fashion, the many diadems of the Rider-Messiah and true King of kings (19.6,12). Also borrowed from 12.3 are the monster's seven heads. As for the 'blasphemous names' by which their adversaries are known, they can only be corrupted divine epithets that testify to diabolical pretensions of divinity: only God and his Christ represent ultimate reality. I am reminded of how Jesus spotted this claim during the temptations he overcame at the outset of his ministry; in Lk 4.8 and Mt 4.10 we hear him retort using a quotation from Deut 6.13.[24] In the present context, the same blasphemy also provokes a riposte in the form of an assertion that true names of dignity will belong, in the final analysis, to Christ alone (19.11-12,16). All this being so, it is clear that 13.1 is the starting-point for a description conditioned, in a sustained way, by factors of mimicry and impersonation; we are face to face with a real parody of Christ[25] which the text's later insistence on the monster's blasphemies will only serve to underline.[26] The flood of blasphemies spewing out from the monster's maw is an attack on the supreme name, the heavenly dwelling and the angel-servants of God (13.6); in other words, an assault respectively on the dignity, presence and entourage of God and the Lamb, as previously evoked in the worship scene of 5.1-14.

The next thing to have an impact on ear and eye, because of its perfect symmetry with the Lamb 'as though slain' (5.6),[27] is a head 'as though slain' (13.3), mortally wounded (with its throat cut, like the Lamb's) and yet miraculously healed. Such is its importance that this detail will merit repetition twice more (13.12,14; see further 17.8,11). As Christ's death and resurrection, which are being parodied here, had generated the 'new song' of 5.9, so they now conjure up no less than a pseudo-risen one whose caricature of a healed wound suggests deliberate satanic imitation of Christ's death. The history of exegesis shows that it has not been difficult to detect this very thing: beginning with Hippolytus in the Early Church, commentators have indeed spotted it easily.[28] However, it may be the case here that the wound which disfigures the monster is actually caused by the stigmata of the Crucified One, in the sense that the latter's death deals a death-blow to the powers of evil in general and, as chapter 12 of Revelation testifies, to the serpent in particular.[29] If this were true, the link from cause to effect would only sharpen a parody that is already very pointed; if the monster's congenital wound, healed in appearance only, had been occasioned by the

honourable stigmata of the Christ who gave his own life, the caricature could only be further underscored.

Keeping all these points in mind, it becomes clear that it is the death of Christ, whose importance is underlined for the reader from the very start (in 1.5-7 and then 5.9,12), that continues to be of first importance in chapter 13. What has changed is that now it comes clothed in a new, parodic garb.[30] Christ is the Risen One so the monster, too, comes back to life in a deceptive pseudo-resurrection[31] by which the earth is bewitched and pressed into its service. The reader, however, is not fooled. Irony tinges the whole affair from start to finish, for although the monster may hope to discredit Jesus Christ's work of salvation, what actually transpires is the opposite and it is the monster that looks ridiculous! In the plot, the monster's trickery is about passing off its defeat as a great victory. The resurrection of the two witnesses (11.11-12), akin to that of the Crucified One himself, probably provides the monster with a second anchor point for its own resuscitation. Its so-called death and resurrection make the sea monster a sham saviour, hard to distinguish from the true Messiah. Jesus had warned his disciples against misleading appearances (Mt 24.5,11,24) and now, in a similar way, John seems to do all in his power to make his readers just as vigilant. Once forewarned they will not fall into the same trap as the credulous peoples or hoodwinked inhabitants of the earth (13.4,8). The devil, as Martin Luther used to say, might want to be God's ape but has never ceased to be his devil, held firmly on a leash.

With the appearance of the second monster, the ongoing caricature develops further. Characteristic of the activity of this sidekick is its powerful speech (13.11 'would speak', 13.14 'saying . . .' and 13.15 'it was permitted . . . to make the image speak . . .'). However, its speech is just sweet talking which contrasts with what the witnesses say (11.3 'they will prophesy'; 11.5 'fire will come out of their mouths') and which parodies the strong Word of the Risen One (2.16, compare 19.11,15). Every time it reappears the second monster will be dubbed 'false prophet' (16.13; 19.20; 20.10): this appellation is justified in that it provides a clear link to the pseudo-christs and false prophets, opposed to the true Messiah, whom Jesus expected in the end-time (Mt 24.24) and to which he referred, in advance, as wolves in sheep's clothing (Mt 7.15). So the incongruity of a monster that looks like a lamb but sounds like a dragon is hardly surprising at this point. The story of this unleashed monster, whose every trait makes it an anti-incarnation of the Crucified and Risen Christ, has a firm anchor at the core of the account of the witnesses in chapter 11, which tells of their faithfulness, death and resurrection – in other words, of their passion.[32] Once their testimony has been delivered the monster's victory is allowed to ensue, with express 'permission' for it not unlike that which led to the Son's crucifixion by the Romans. Not until 20.10 will this antagonist's anti-christ career finally come to an end.

Now that the dragon and the sea monster have been joined by the land monster, a counterfeit trinity is assembled and ready to reign over its baleful kingdom, with the third member fulfilling a role comparable to that of the Holy Spirit under God's rule. With its coming on the scene an indivisible group of three adversaries is set up (16.13); three being the number of divinity, as of its counterfeit, it is opposed in its number and its function to the divine Trinity.[33] When we see the second monster, from the moment it enters the scene, making use of the authority delegated to it by insuring the universal worship of the first monster (13.12), this is nothing if not striking. The first monster's resemblance to the Lamb is explicitly re-echoed in two distinct but equivalent formulae, each of them a caricature: first, 'whose mortal wound was healed' (v.12) – and we may note in passing that the monster is now healed in its entirety (and no longer just its head); then, 'who[34] has a sword wound and came back to life' (v.14).

Bestowal on the second monster of an authority capable of prompting earth's inhabitants to worship the first monster (13.12) is tantamount to being delegated a kind of pseudo-apostolic authority. Taking over its master's 'ministry' this underling relies on a wonder – the so-called 'resurrection' of the first – for promulgating its veneration more effectively, performing signs and wonders of its own to lend false credence to its proclamation. All this resembles 'a sort of anti-Pentecost'.[35] Impressive though the three-member anti-team might look at first sight, it is actually as ridiculous a triumvirate as we could find see. Had not the satan pretentiously claimed, in the desert, to possess and to command the kingdoms of the world, only to be obliged to concede defeat to God's Anointed One (Mt 4.9; Lk 4.6)? So, when Revelation's dragon has to be content with manufacturing its 'lamb' in two bits, we can only smile. At the end of the day, the close parallels between the monsters and the true Lamb convey a veiled compliment made, in spite of it all, to God.

Let us take a closer look at the second monster. Just as the Spirit has a relation to the Risen Christ and speaks with his voice (2.1, 2.7 and the rest of the oracles to Churches; *cf.* 5.6), so the rival false prophet resembles Christ in externals but gives itself away by its devil-dragon voice (13.11). When the second monster promotes (13.12) the superstitious worship which the first demands (13.4), this is an obviously diabolical imitation of the Spirit's speech. According to Jn 16.14, the Spirit draws from the dead and risen Son whatever will glorify the Son. The dragon and first monster desire, in their own way, to replicate the close relationship and community of goods which exist between the Father and the Son (13.2 ; *cf.* Jn 16.15 and Mt 11.27), simulating it in their own collaboration.

The interpretative ambiguity surrounding the infamous '666' (see on 13.18 below) is well known. Whatever might be the value of 666 if it were to be unscrambled – a puzzle that remains unresolved even after a long history of successive attempts at deciphering it – the veil is lifted ever so slightly by what we have just seen: this mysterious number represents still

one more attempt at deriding divinity.[36] As will become clearer later, readers – wise and intelligent as John takes them to be (13.18) – are supposed to get behind the number to the scheming monster's motives which it symbolises and perceive, there, an effort which (when it all comes down) is doomed to failure.

A consequence of this is that we now understand better the absence of the true Lamb, invisible since the end of the account of the opening of the seals (in 8.2) where he had been the central figure. This invisibility was not, after all, his eclipse; and so the eruption onto the scene of a second beast that simulates a lamb so well (13.11) should not destabilise readers to the point that they forget to whom, alone, primacy can belong: to the Redeemer and Son, in accordance with the Father's will (7.9-17). While it is true that the victory of the anti-god forces appears assured at the end of chapter 13 and that the universal reign of the evil one seems to have become established at the centre of human history, these are nothing but illusions.

Revelation 14.1-5

Any remaining doubt is dispelled, in any case, by the next episode. The curtain rises on the Lamb's comeback as he stands, in the victory of his death and resurrection, erect on the mountainside in the company of those he has redeemed.[37] A dragon, a false lamb and a pseudo-prophet have been enacting a weak parody of the divine economy, but all of this now evaporates completely and these liars must give way to the Lamb's followers who have remained true to the genuine Word and who live lives beyond reproach (14.5). As in chapters 4 and 5, a hymn is perfectly appropriate at this point. It is brand new and rings out both before the throne and on earth (14.3), in acknowledgement of God's omnipresence. In sum, the standing Lamb, alive for eternity since his resurrection, offers a curt rejoinder to the sea monster's so-called resurrection (13.3), literally countering it here and now by its very appearing,[38] whilst his position 'standing on the mountain' (14.1) is also a put-down to the dragon 'posted on the sand by the sea' (12.18).[39]

Revelation 16.13-14

Nevertheless, the parenthesis of evil is not yet definitively closed. Many more scenes in Revelation still await discovery and readers have not yet seen the last movements of the diabolical triumvirate made up of the dragon and two monsters. Which is why, after we lose sight of them for a while, the pendulum swings back and they reappear as a 'hellish trio'[40] in 16.13-14, for the outpouring of the sixth bowl. On this occasion they spit forth three impure or demonic spirits; functionaries[41] tasked with charming the kings of the earth, these spirits offer an arresting contrast to the three angels of 14.6ff whose role is to carry out God's designs. We are not to be fooled by this abortive comeback, however, for it will have no effect whatsoever on the ultimate fate of this team from hell, which will founder in the lake of fire.