A Review of The Apocalypse Unsealed, by Robert Riggs (New York: Philosophical Library, 1981) with some thoughts on the use of Christian Scripture in the Baha'i community.

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To: XX, bbst@yahoogroups.com
Subject: Re: [bbst] Coming of Muhammad
Date sent: Sun, 01 Jul 2007 22:51:04 +0200

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> the best book I've read on this is Robert Riggs' Apocalypse
> Unsealed.

This is the worst Bahai book I have ever encountered: he manages to make Moffet look like a merely moderate looney. A more thorough-going collection of complete nonsense would be very hard to achieve.

The Apocalypse Unsealed,
some thoughts on the use of Christian Scripture in the Baha'i community.
by Sen McGlinn.

I would like to present some thoughts on the use of Biblical literature and general, and apocalyptic literature in general, in the Baha'i community, and I want to do this by beginning with what is in essence a book review of one well-known Baha'i book, *The Apocalypse Unsealed,* by Robert Riggs. This will enable me to avoid sweeping generalizations about what 'some Baha'is' or 'many Western Baha'is' or Baha'is of a particular background or generation may believe. It is left to the reader to consider from his or her own experience the extent to which the beliefs and attitude to the Bible represented by this book may be typical of a current within the Baha'i community. This personal judgement will be at least as valid as my own feeling, that the apocalyptic attitude is typical of a significant but marginal group in the Baha'i community, but that a certain tactlessness in appropriating the Bible is much more prevalent.

Beginning with an examination of particular faults in the book, followed in some cases by suggestions as to how the matter might have been better handled, will lead me from concrete practice to more generalized practice. One would like to go beyond that, to a general theory of how we are to treat the Bible, this 'book of God' which is

nevertheless not authentic, whose real authors are largely unknown (some of whom pretend to be someone else) and which has in any case been formed more by its numerous editors than by its authors. Such a general theory is however beyond my abilities, and given the heterogeneous nature of the Bible, it may be a permanent impossibility. Thus I will attempt no more than to go from particularities to more generalized suggestions for a practical approach.

The Apocalypse Unsealed, is not the first and may not be the last example of a genre. In recent years there have been other book-length expositions of this kind by Richard Backwell and Ruth Moffet, and in the earlier years of the faith there were a large number of shorter works and pamphlets in a more or less apocalyptic vein. The fact that Ruth Moffet's book ran to two printings, in 1977 and 1980, is an indication that this literature has won a significant audience. I have chosen to look at Rigg's book because it is later than the others (1981) and includes much of the material found in earlier works. In it, Riggs has collected a vast mass of data, relevant and irrelevant to the interpretation of the Revelation of St John. The irrelevant material often shows the author pursuing his own interests, and losing track for the moment of the text which he intends to expound. The number of 'pyramid inches' in the Great Pyramid of Giza, and the 72 Stupas on the great Temple of Siva at Borobudar, for instance, might have been omitted without harming the argument. The arcane details gathered from ancient religious systems and newer kinds of nonsense give *The Apocalypse Unsealed* the 'look and feel' of the literature of the world of pendulums, Atlantis, pyramids, and auras.

Some of the material which appears to be relevant will not stand closer examination: for instance the 22 chapters in the Apocalypse are said to correspond to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet, which is a sign of the book's completion. Unfortunately the chapter divisions were made centuries after the text was written.

Other material is anachronistic: at page 26 for example a correlation is made between the names of the children of Jacob and the signs of the Zodiac. Such a link cannot be ruled out, but the connection exists, if it exists at all, in the Judaism of the 8th or 7th Centuries BCE, and Riggs makes no attempt to show that it was known or important to the Christians of the first century. In fact, since the writer of Revelation omits the tribe of Dan (Rev 7:5), the

evidence would seem to be against any intended reference to the 'poem of the tribes' in Genesis 49.

Much of the material is so flabbergasting that one is left groping for a systematic way of dealing with it. One reads that "Essence, Creator, and creatures" constitute, in Muslim thought, a triad to symbolize the abstract Divinity; that the Jews, and not the Romans, 'pierced' Jesus; that Melchisedec (p 95) and possibly Confucius (p 45) are Manifestations; that 'Issachar, described in the Bible as "a strong ass crouching down between the sheep folds," therefore represents Taurus the Bull." There is some quite astonishing arithmetic too: at one point (p 261) a selection of items in Revelation which have a numerical value of 9 is made, and then the probability that all items will have a value of 9 is calculated. The answer should of course be 1, or 100%, since the items were selected for just this property, but the answer arrived at in the book is .00000006969!

Even supposing that the book should find a good editor, and emerge with irrelevant and incorrect material removed, I would still have considerable arguments with its underlying method. Riggs says that his approach in interpretation is "first to decide whether the passage is reasonable when taken literally. If not, look for an allegorical meaning that is in accord with reason and common sense. That failing, the passage may be assumed to have a transcendental meaning" (p 30). Other criteria are used to guide the interpretation: "nothing that is contrary to [Riggs'] own convictions as a Baha'i" (p 5) is to be admitted, and some specific interpretations of Revelations found in the published Baha'i Writings, and pilgrims' notes with "obvious errors corrected" (p 4) are referred to, along with 'Abdu'l-Baha's "gentle whisperings" received directly by the author (xvi). In addition, symbols in Revelation are interpreted according to the meaning they have when they appear, in other connections, in the Baha'i Writings and elsewhere, despite Riggs' own recognition that a symbol "may assume any one of several values depending upon the context" (p 7). Very extensive use is also made of number symbolism and of 'gematria' (systems of assigning a numerical value to letters, and thus to words) in various alphabets, and of a variety of calendars, to create a web of numerical patterns. This wide choice of methods and sources is applied to a potentially infinite mass of data - Revelation, Daniel, astrology, gnosticism, Jung, the Golden ratio, the cabbala, Gnostic writings, pyramids, and so forth - with an ingenuity which would, I think, suffice to 'prove' Riggs meaning from

a field of random numbers. For example, Rev 9:16 refers to an army of 200,000,000 horsemen, which is interpreted here as the army of Sultan Mehmet which took Constantinople in AD 1453. However that army was no more than 80,000 men, of whom only a portion are likely to have been horsemen. The problem is resolved by noting that the archetypical value of 200,000,000 is 2, and that Mehmet's army contained 2 kinds of soldiers. Q.E.D! Such a method could find numerical links to order: if you need 3, count the cooks or artillerymen, while 4, wonderfully, is the archetypical value of (CE) 1453, and also of 787, (1453 minus 666), and also of the 391 (roman) years between 1453 and 1844 (p 138-9). I leave it to the reader to find the values 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, with the aid of the gematria (abjad) of Mehmet's name, the date in the Islamic calendar, and other data to choice. The method is fun, but quite meaningless: I have not been able to find a single indubitable instance in which we could show that the author of Revelation used and intended gematria or any such detailed arithmetic calculations (though he does use number symbolism, a distinct and simpler literary device). Yet Riggs claims to be "reconstructing the original meaning" (p 5). Even in passages not affected by the passion for esotera and arithmetic, this claim is rather doubtful, as we shall see in relation to the place and time to which Revelation refers.

It is fundamental to Riggs' argument that "the 7 churches which are in Asia", to whom Revelation is addressed, are the 7 religions of the world prior to the Bab and Baha'u'llah (Confucius and Melchizedec are, thankfully, overlooked). Yet, if we are reconstructing the original meaning, we should take into account that, at that time, 'Asia' referred to a province of the Roman Empire, in what we now call Turkey. The 7 churches are named after their cities, and all of these are, in fact, found in what was the province of 'Asia Minor'. Some are addressed in terms peculiar to the historical 'Asian' cities: thus Laodicea, a city whose drinking water was piped from a hot spring some distance away, is said to be "luke- warm", and Ephesus, a city which had been relocated twice, is said to be unfaithful, and is threatened with a further removal. (Which eventually occurred, due to silting of the harbour). According to Rigg's first method, then, we must expect him to take the literal meaning, since it is reasonable. What we read, however, is that "while the prejudiced reader of first century Rome might be tempted to restrict the term 'Asia' to include only the Roman Province of Asia (Asia Minor), in the unprejudiced view...". The unprejudiced view, naturally, is Riggs own. Laodicea is Islam, and Ephesus is the Sabean Faith. Where an interpretation consists simply of the arbitrary

statement that 'A means B', it cannot be logically disproved: the best one can do is offer an alternative interpretation which is rationally supported (and thus is also potentially refutable), and invite a comparison.

One more example of the method: Revelations repeatedly refers to the immediate time-frame of the author, not only in its many contemporary references, but also in phrases such as 'things which must shortly come to pass', 'soon', 'the time is at hand', and so forth. Moreover we know that apocalyptic literature in general is written, in times of crisis, to describe contemporary events which the author believes to constitute, if seen with the eye of faith, the 'end of the world', or God's intervention in history. To establish its authority, it presents the appearance of having been written before it actually was, so that it can correctly 'prophesy' well- known events which in fact occurred before it was written. It can then go on to show God's justice and vindication which is to come. Apocalyptic literature thus cannot work unless its contemporary audience can identify the past and contemporary events described. Revelations was (very probably) written during the persecutions of Domitian, around 95 AD (but incorporating earlier material going back perhaps to 68 AD). Many of its symbolic allusions make sense within that context: the five-month torture of the people of the land (9:16) is very probably a prophecy after the fact of the 5-month reign of terror under Gessius Florus. The author of Revelation, by his use of the phrase 'locusts like horses prepared for battle' (Rev 9:7, Joel 2:4) compares this period to the vivid description of a locust-plague in the book of Joel. Riggs understands the five months to be the "space of about 150 years [5 months x 30 days], from the initial [Moslem] invasions of 633 AD until the peak of the Empire ... in 786 AD". Since we have seen above that he also understands it to refer to the fall of Constantinople in 1453 AD, the choice of 786 AD for the end of the Moslem 'tormenting' of Christendom seems rather inconsistent.

There are a great many passages in Revelations which can, with more or less probability, be related to events of the Middle- east of the first century. Such evidence is passed over in silence throughout the book, though, in his extensive research, Riggs must have encountered it. This might be regarded as dishonest, but I think it would be fairer to the author's evident sincerity to say that its meaning for the author, or the first-century audience, or indeed for Christians today, simply does not interest him.

Leaving aside the weakness of method in the book, I think we should also ask whether the goal of the interpretation is a good one, for it is directed to achieving an interpretation in which the Christian (and Jewish) content of Revelation is reduced to a minimum. For example, the sacrificed lamb of Rev 5:6 is interpreted as "The constellation Aries, the Ram or Lamb ... because of the Precession of the Equinoxes, the Lamb is 'slain' for a new constellation at each zodiacal age ... there are two Lambs in this new Age ... the Bab and 'Abdul-Baha." (p 100) Anyone at all familiar with early Christian writing, and the Johannine literature in particular, can be in no doubt that the "lamb who was slain" refers, quite simply, to Jesus. A Baha'i might wish to persuade Christians that the truth concerning the value of sacrifice to which their symbol refers has a wider application than they have thought, but I can't see that any good purpose is served by attempting to deny the plain meaning of the text. This amounts to taking Christians' symbols and book from them, to install them, stripped of Christ, in the midst of a curiosity-shop full of old and new esotera. Instead of asking Christians to extend and enlarge the truths they hold, this approach asks them to begin by conceding that they never held any truths, that Revelation was not a Christian book at all, but rather a Baha'i book in disguise.

Not only is this approach not true, or kind, or effective, it also requires extreme distortions both of the text and of the Faith, to make the two fit. In this example (and also at p 179), 'Abdu'l-Baha is apparently elevated to the station of Manifestation, a claim which is supported, if I have followed the argument at this point correctly, by the similarity between the constellation of Aries and that of Triangulum, and the fact that there are 24 elders, but only 12 tribes, disciples, and Imams. Since Revelation speaks of only one lamb, the interpretation here is not only strained, it is quite unnecessary.

One might, so much more easily, have interpreted the passage by explaining the old temple sacrifice of Judaism, the Christian transferral of this to Christ's sacrifice, and then by citing Baha'u'llah's account of the world-revolution achieved when Christ 'yielded up His breath to God'. Just as Christianity appropriated and reapplied Jewish symbols, Baha'is have a right to 'translate' New Testament symbols, giving them new significance as parts of the larger Baha'i world of meaning, but the New Testament must remain for us the book of another religion. We may build on it, but we should not, and

need not, steal it. It may be difficult to envision a religious world containing a connected, but unassimilated, foreign element, yet Christianity's relation to the Old Testament shows that such a relationship is both workable and enriching.

The style of our appropriation of Christian texts also needs some thought. I am suggesting a careful, reasoned, historically responsible expansion of the original meaning, but it could be argued that this is an approach inappropriate to the colourful and imaginative apocalyptic literature. Revelation itself often takes elements from Jewish literature, without regard for context or period, and creates something new and often powerful from them in a Christian context, at the price of some violence to 'the original meaning'. I suggest that this freedom is legitimate if one is writing an apocalypse, but disastrous for the interpreter: it requires a creative genius and the vocation of the prophet.

Just as there is no text apart from a context, there is no interpretation apart from the situation of the interpreter. The context of Revelation is unalterably first-century Judeo-Christianity: the historico-critical methods developed by (mainly) Christian scholars can help us to understand this context and see its effects. But an interpretation into a Baha'i community in its 2nd century must be different to a reading for a Christian community in its 20th century: we must resist the illusion that scientific method provides a non-situational reading.

The position of 'Abdu'l-Baha's interpretations also needs to be mentioned, although I hasten to add they do not exhibit the feverish apocalyptic imagination we find in Riggs and Moffet. The situation of contemporary Western Baha'is is quite different to that of those first Western pilgrims, many of them from millenialist Christian backgrounds, who went to 'Abdu'l-Baha with their questions, and who have left us transcripts and pilgrims' notes on which Riggs and others have drawn. They needed to differentiate themselves from their Christian background, and they expected an imminent catastrophic divine judgement which would bring vindication and righteousness. The Baha'is of the 1990s need to establish a dialogue with the churches, as one major religion to another, and we (and the world) are looking for principles and practical measures to build a more just social order and to unleash the frustrated powers of human potential. So there has been a quite radical shift in work which we expect a Biblical interpretation to do for us today. The situation, social

position, hopes and anxieties of the early Baha'is were in some respects similar to the quasi-Jewish Christians at the end of the first century: our situation has no such close parallels. Yet, while we do not entirely share the personal and community situation to which Abdu'l-Baha's responses were addressed, we remain substantially the same community, spiritual descendants of those early Baha'is of the West. What is required is not the wholesale relegation of their legacy to the realm of 'historical interest only', but rather a certain tact or sense of appropriateness on the part of interpreters, particularly in using unauthenticated material, transcripts of extemporary translations, and so forth. We should not put more weight on such material than it can bear. Nor, perhaps, should we try to imitate 'Abdu'l-Baha's method of interpretation, unless we are quite sure that our spiritual insight is equal to the task.

Soundly based readings will require a respect for the original meaning of the text, a good deal less audacity in proposing its meaning for our own community, and a willingness to learn where others have gone before: instead of re-inventing the wheel, we could start by using the many good critical commentaries already published.