

The Mighty Angel, the Little Book and the Mission of the Prophet (Rev 10)

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Abstract:

The identity of the “mighty angel” of Rev 10, the significance of his actions and the meaning of the little scroll he is bringing to the Prophet John are some of the most difficult problems the interpreter is encountering in the Book of the Apocalypse. Modern scholarship brought a lot of valuable observations on these issues, but reading commentaries one gets the impression that the ‘puzzle’ remains unsolved. Aware of the almost insurmountable problems standing before, in a humble spirit toward the great work of the authors who opened so many paths, and carrying the huge responsibility staying on the shoulders of the Orthodox exegete to interpret the inspired text *in* the Church and *through* the Church, the author of this study tries to offer a fresh commentary of this troubling biblical page and to bring a new light on it. A critical analysis of the text in light of St John’s theology, biblical context, Church’s Tradition and contemporary research brings out the fact that the identification of the ‘mighty angel’ with an angelic being, even with a „mighty one”, as the “angel of the Lord” or one of the archangels, is at least incomplete. More support can one find within the text and its context for the Christological interpretation, but unfortunately neither this one does not answer all questions. Probably the best way of dealing with our text would be not to draw attention to the strong points of one path and to minimize the support for another, but rather to bring them together.

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If the last book of the biblical canon could be considered in many respects the climax of its theological thought¹, this is surely true for the angelology. The narrative of ch. 10 introduces what is probably the most interesting angelic character of the entire Holy Scripture. Introduced as “another mighty angel” (ἄλλον ἄγγελον ἰσχυρὸν), he appears nowhere else in the Book of Revelation. However, his characteristics and role sound familiar to the reader acquainted with St John’s style and imagery. Yet his identity remains wrapped in mystery.

1. The vision of Rev 10 in its context

The narrative of the chapter 10 must be seen as forming a single unit with that of 11, 1-13. The scene of the mighty angel and the eating of the little scroll (10, 1-10) in fact serves as an introduction to the scene of the measuring of the temple and that of the two witnesses (1, 1-13), which, not without reason, was considered one of the most darksome sections of the Apocalypse, both because of its content as well as because of its relationship with the context². Whatever its relationship with the larger context may be, one thing becomes clear from the first reading: this two-fold unit of Rev 10, 1 – 11, 13 is situated within the heptad of the trumpets, making up an interlude between the sixth and the seventh sounds. It seems to interrupt the trumpets series, but, considered within the larger context of the book, it proves consistent with the author’s style³.

2. The description and the role of the mighty angel

With his usual καὶ εἶδον (“and I saw”), the seer introduces a new vision. The first three verses introduce its main character. Schematically, his characteristics and first actions could be represented as follows⁴:

The Prophet sees

(1) another mighty angel (10:1),

¹ See Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy. Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T. Clark, 1993.

² Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 16), Tübingen: Mohr, ³1970, p. 87.

³ Such an interlude also occurs between the sixth and the seventh seal, where a double vision of the Church is provided (Rev 7:1-17).

⁴ This schematic representation is inspired by David E. Aune’s outline (*Revelation 6-16* [Word Biblical Commentary 52B], Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998, p. 553).

- (2) coming down from Heaven,
- (3) wrapped with a cloud.
- (4) On his head has *the* rainbow,
- (5) his face is like the sun,
- (6) his legs are like fiery columns and
- (7) in his hand he holds a little open scroll/book (2a).

If the identity of this angel is the subject of intense debate, some things about his status and his role within God's redemptive plan emerge quite clearly even at a cursory glance: his heavenly origin, his authority, and his double mission – to announce the accomplishment of the „mystery of God” (10:7) and to assign to the seer a new prophetic mission (10:8-11).

When approached analytically, the text reveals much more. Let us discover its peculiarities. First, we have to pay attention to the description of this character.

(1) The seer says that he “saw” (εἶδον) “another mighty angel” (ἄλλον ἄγγελον ἰσχυρὸν). The expression ἄγγελος ἰσχυρὸς (“mighty angel”) is peculiar to the Book of Revelation, where, excepting our text, it occurs two times, in 5:2 and 18:21. Both the “mighty angel” of 5:2 and the “another mighty angel” of 10:1 are related to a scroll, while the ἄγγελος ἰσχυρὸς of 18:21 is linked to a different task,⁵ which makes most commentators distinguish him from the other two. And both the mighty angel of 5:2 and 10:1ff. are proclaiming their message in a “great voice” (κηρύσσοντα ἐν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, in 5:2; ἔκραξεν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, in 10:3).

Given their relationship with the two books, which is surely not accidental, some commentators think that in the first two occurrences (Rev 5:2; 10:1f.) we have the same angel⁶. Yet the parallelism between the two points to some clear differences. First, this one is identified as ἄλλον (another), and this adjective is clearly intended to differentiate him from the first one. Second, while both are characterized with the adjective ἰσχυρὸς (mighty), the one in 10:1f. is described as no other angelic being in the Scripture, with attributes that recall biblical theophanies⁷.

(2) The seer sees this angel coming down from Heaven (καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ). In the Christian Tradition, the verb καταβαίνω is used for the Incarnation of the Logos: The One who comes down from Heaven is first of all the Son of God. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus says about Himself that He has come down

⁵ The mighty angel from Rev 18:21-24 takes up a stone like a great millstone and throws it into the sea, proclaiming prophetically the dreadful punishment of Babylon.

⁶ Robert H. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation* [The New International Commentary on the New Testament], Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, p. 201) renders the Greek expression as “another angel, a mighty one”, and this brings him to the idea of a possible identification with the “mighty angel” of Rev 5:2.

⁷ Charles Brüttsch, *La clarté de l'Apocalypse*, Genève: Labor et Fides, ⁵1966, p. 169.

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from Heaven (καταβέβηκα ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ – John 6:38). This redemptory act was retained later in the Nicene Creed, where the Incarnation is introduced by the statement that the Son *came down* from Heaven: διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν σωτηρίαν κατελθόντα ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν, καὶ σαρκωθέντα ἐκ Πνεύματος Ἁγίου καὶ Μαρίας τῆς Παρθένου, καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα. At Jesus' Baptism, the Holy Spirit is coming down from Heaven⁸.

(3) The mighty angel is “surrounded by a cloud” (περιβεβλημένον νεφέλην). With only two exceptions – here and in Rev 11:12 – in Revelation the clouds/ cloud accompany/ies the Son of Man (1:7; 14:14.15.16). Thus the image recalls the famous messianic prophecy of Dan 7:13-14. In Rev 11:12 – a text which belongs to the same unity with 10:1f. – the cloud appears in an ecclesiological-eschatological image: The two witnesses-prophets, who represent the Church in its witnessing-prophetic dimension⁹, ascend to Heaven ἐν τῇ νεφέλῃ (“in a cloud”). All these parallels suggest not only the divine, but also the eschatological dimension one should not miss in this picture¹⁰.

(4) The next element of the description brings up a more complex symbol, the rainbow (ἡ ἶρις ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτοῦ), which harks back to the Noahic Covenant and, by its typological meaning, to the New Covenant. It is a unifying symbol which brings together the Old and the New Testament, God's love, mercy and faithfulness towards His creation, as well as His Grace which is partaken to mankind through the Church's Mysteries. We have to note the definite article: on his head he has not *a* rainbow, but *the* rainbow. The noun ἶρις (rainbow), without the definite article, appeared already in 4:3, in the vision of the heavenly throne: around it there is “a rainbow” (ἶρις κυκλόθεν τοῦ θρόνου). It will be meaningful to parallel our image with the description of God in Ezek 1:26-28, where the divine radiance is compared with the rainbow. Therefore, it will not be inappropriate to see in this detail an indication of the divine grace through which the humans are enabled to answer to God's calling becoming co-workers with the Holy Spirit¹¹.

(5) The fifth detail is the most striking: „his face [is] like the sun” (τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος). We remember that at Transfiguration the disciples

⁸ The same verb occurs in all the canonic narratives of Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:10; Matt 3:16; Luke 3:22).

⁹ Daniel Mihoc, „Τὶ τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις.” *Ερμηνευτική και θεολογική ἀνάλυση ἐκκλησιολογικῶν χωρίων τῆν Ἀποκαλύψεως*, Athens: Σταμούλης, 2008, pp. 224-245.

¹⁰ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 101.

¹¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. II, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, ²1997, pp. 143. For Gregory K. Beale the rainbow is a clear sign for identifying the angel as a divine being (*The Book of Revelation. A Commentary on the Greek Text* [The New International Greek Testament Commentary], Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans & Cambridge, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1999, p. 523).

perceived Jesus' face as shining like the sun (ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος – Matt 17:2) and that in the inaugural vision of the Apocalypse Christ's ὄψις is compared with the sun (ἡ ὄψις αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος φαίνει ἐν τῇ δυνάμει αὐτοῦ – Rev 1:16).

(6) The sixth element adds to this grandiose character a cosmic dimension: his feet look like pillars of fire (ὡς στῦλοι πυρός). The metaphor of pillars of fire recalls the history of Exodus, which plays a major role in St John's theology. In Ex 13:21 we read that God was guiding his people in a pillar of cloud during day-time and in a pillar of fire during the night, *so that they could travel by day and by night*¹². This parallel could suggest something about the nature of the angel and the ministry the angel fulfills. But the metaphor could be even more suggestive, its constitutive terms, στῦλος (pillar) and πῦρ (fire), providing a rich range of possible hints/associations.

In the Old Testament, the term στῦλος (pillar) sometimes carries a cosmological significance¹³, the whole creation being seen as 'the house' that God has built¹⁴. The New Testament adds to this meaning an ecclesiological one. In Gal 2:9 St Paul attests that James, Cephas, and John were considered στῦλοι (pillars) in the Church. Moreover, the Church itself is στῦλος τῆς ἀληθείας (1 Tim 3:15). The metaphor implies the image of the Church as God's temple¹⁵, in which some people can play such a major role as pillars in the structure of the ancient worship buildings. The image is also present in the Book of Revelation, where the Risen Christ speaks of His Father's Temple, in which everyone could become a "pillar" (Ὁ νικῶν ποιήσω αὐτὸν στῦλον ἐν τῷ ναῷ τοῦ Θεοῦ – 3:11).

As for the fire (πῦρ), its symbolism is even more meaningful for our image: it is linked with theophanies, miracles, the work of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit, as well as with sacrifices and God's judgment. Like the image of the pillar, the metaphor of fire is also used in ecclesiological images. In Luke 12:49 Jesus says: "I have come to bring fire (πῦρ) on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (NIV). His disciples must lighten the world as the λύχνον (lamp) which "gives light to everyone in the house" (Matt 5:15). And in Rev 1:12-20 the Church is imaged as seven lampstands, disposed in circle around the Son of Man, whose eyes look ὡς φλόξ πυρός ("as a flame of fire", KJV).

¹² This detail does not appear in LXX.

¹³ See for instance Pr 9:1: "Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars" (NASB; LXX: ἡ σοφία ἠκοδόμησεν ἑαυτῇ οἶκον καὶ ὑπήρεισεν στῦλους ἑπτὰ). Scholars usually consider the "seven pillars" to be the seven planet known in Antiquity.

¹⁴ Ulrich Wilckens, στῦλος, in: Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, VII, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 733.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 3:10-17; Eph 2:21; Rev 3:12; cf. 1 Pt 2:5.

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(7) The angel has a little book/scroll in his hand. The original term is βιβλαρίδιον. It is an absolute hapax. Probably the best modern English rendering would be “little booklet”¹⁶. The only thing said about it is that it is open. As a parallel, we should also mention the extensive use of the image of an open scroll both in Greco-Roman¹⁷ and Christian art¹⁸.

This little scroll is not identified and our text does not say anything else about it till the end of the chapter, when the Prophet is commanded to take it and to eat it (verses 8-10). The image echoes Ezek 2:9-10, where the Prophet sees a hand extending a closed scroll, which is opened before him. Ezek 2 speaks about Ezekiel’s prophetic calling; Rev 10 paints John’s own calling to prophecy. There are correspondences between these two prophetic texts. We will consider them closer in our analysis of the scene of eating the little scroll.

But now we have to answer the second important question the lecture of our text inevitably raises: What represents this little scroll? Unfortunately, the data provided by the text are not very concluding. This explains both the wide range of interpretations and the challenges they are still facing.

Some have argued that the little book is identical with the one held by God Himself in Rev 5, and that its status is the consequence of the Victorious Lamb’s opening of the seals (6:1 – 8:5). Why then the notable difference in size between the two? It is difficult to accept the view that βιβλαρίδιον is just a synonym for βιβλίον. On the contrary, its dimension could suggest two things: it is not identical with the larger scroll from Rev 5:1 and its content is not intended to encompass the same realities as the first one.

The supposition of some other scholars that it covers the contents of the chapters 12-22, while the chapters 1-11 would represent the content of the larger book, lacks any solid internal basis and therefore has not found much support. No more convincing is the thesis that its content is revealed in the next chapters, namely 11-13, which speak about both the Prophet’s and the Church’s prophetic authority and mission.

However, its origin and nature suggest a link with the first one. Both are heavenly books: The first, sealed, is seen in Heaven, in the right hand of God the

¹⁶ George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, p. 142.

¹⁷ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 558.

¹⁸ For some interesting reflections on the influence of the Book of Revelation on plastic arts see Pierre Prigent, “Art et Révélation. Réflexions Théologiques sur l’iconographie de l’Apocalypse”, in: *1900ετηρίς της Αποκαλύψεως Ιωάννου. Πρακτικά διεθνούς διεπιστημονικού συμπόσιου (Αθήναι-Πάτμος, 16-26 Σεπτεμβρίου 1995)*, Athens: Εκδόσεις της εν Πάτμω ιεράς πατριαρχικής μονής Αγίου Ιωάννου του Θεολόγου, 1999, pp. 383-406.

Father, and there is taken and opened by the Victorious Lamb; the second, opened, is brought down from Heaven by this “mighty angel”. It has to be used on earth¹⁹. But if the first one is sealed, the little one is opened. Within the larger framework of the Apocalypse, its openness has to be seen as one more consequence of both the Lamb’s redemptory work as well as of His action on the sealed book. The opening of the seals had a revelatory function, disclosing the mystery of the history in which the only absolute effective power is that of the first horseman (Rev 6:2), who must be identified with Christ Himself and His Church²⁰. In relationship with the first one, the “openness” of the little one suggests not only the availability of its content but also the fact that its content is already active in history.

3. The first actions of the mighty angel (vv. 2b-4)

After the introduction of the mighty angel (vv.1-2a), in vv. 2b-f. we see him acting out. His actions encompass Earth and Heaven: while staying on Earth, through his cry, he releases an utterance of Heaven.

The first action adds another divine-like feature to his portrait: he places his right foot on sea and the left one on land (καὶ ἔθηκεν τὸν πόδα αὐτοῦ τὸν δεξιὸν ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης, τὸν δὲ εὐώνυμον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, v. 2b). St John will reiterate this stance of the angel two more times: (1) in v. 5: ὁ ἄγγελος, ὃν εἶδον ἐστῶτα ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ἤρην τὴν χειρὰ αὐτοῦ τὴν δεξιάν ...); and (2) in v. 8: ὕπαγε λάβε τὸ βιβλίον τὸ ἠνεωγμένον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ τοῦ ἀγγέλου τοῦ ἐστῶτος ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς²¹. This could mean nothing else but that St John wants

¹⁹ This reminds of the little book from *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Vision 2, 3-4).

²⁰ Many interpreters see in the first rider only one expression of evil alongside the other three riders (Rev 6, 3-8). Some find reasons for a positive figure, such as a worldly instrument in the hand of God (John Poirier, “The First Rider: A Response to Michael Bachmann”, *New Testament Studies*, 45, 1999, pp. 257-262), the Gospel (Oscar Cullmann, *Christ et le temps*, col. “Bibliothèque Théologique”, Neuchatel-Paris, 1966, p. 114; Divo Barsotti, *L’Apocalypse*, Pierre Téqui, Paris, 1974, p. 126), the Church (A. Satake, “Kirche und feindliche Welt. Zur dualistischen Auffassung der Menschenwelt in der Johannesapokalypse”, *Kirche. Festschrift G. Bornkamm*, Mohr, Tübingen, 1980, p. 338), or even Jesus Christ (Jacques Ellul, *L’Apocalypse. Architecture en mouvement*, Desclée, Tournai, 1975, p. 154). But Rev 6:1f. speaks about the main forces which drive human history and, if we consider attentively the context and the characteristics of the first horseman, we should admit that no other interpretation fits better than the Christological-ecclesiological one. For St John the ultimate victory belongs only to Jesus Christ and to His Church. They represent the main force which drive history toward its fulfilment. See also Daniel Mihoc, “Istoria umană între suveranitatea lui Hristos și lucrarea lui satan după Apoc 6, 1 – 7, 17”, *Revista Teologică*, VIII (1998) nr. 4, pp. 129-145.

²¹ Worth noting is also the fact that the section will close without any notice about a change of this stance.

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to give it a special emphasis. Through the Holy Scripture the expression “sea and land” is used either for the totality of God’s creation²², either for the whole earth. Therefore, the angel’s stance could be taken as an image for cosmic authority. But this authority is exercised through his “legs” which are compared with pillars of fire, an image which, according to the Exodus imagery, suggests God’s power and loving care. The message is quite clear: the angel’s authority encompasses the whole world, but he inspires not fear, as his colossal²³ appearance could suggest, but all-encompassing care for the creation. He plays not only a revelatory role, but also a protective one.

But this is not all. In Revelation 13 the sea and the earth are the realms from which emerge the two beasts who deceive the “dwellers on the earth”, i.e. those who do not keep the commandments of God and do not hold the testimony of Jesus (cf. Rev 12:17). And we should remember that fire is also a symbol of the light of Christ and of the Gospel, as well as of judgment. At the end of the scene of John’s prophetic commissioning, the seer is told that he has “to prophesy again about/unto/to many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings” (10:11). And in the following section he offers us, in the allegorical story of the two witnesses, a wonderful image of the Church fulfilling its prophetic mission within the same space in which the beast is acting out and the “dwellers on the earth” live. In this context the threefold emphasis of the angel’s location gains a peculiar significance: first, it indicates that the demonic powers acting on earth are under his sovereignty and, second, that their human followers cannot avoid God’s judgment.

The second action of the angel is described as a terrible outcry: “he cried out with a loud voice, as when a lion roars” (ἔκραξεν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ ὡς περ λέων μωκῶται – 10:3a). In Amos 3:8 and Hos 11:10, God’s voice is compared with that of a roaring lion. But in 1 Peter 5:8, Satan’s work is likened with a roaring lion. In each case the image suggests the importance and the power of the work/message. As lion’s roaring cannot be ignored, so heaven’s message, as well as devil’s threat should not be ignored.

The outcry of the angel initiates the uttering of the seven thunders: καὶ ὅτε ἔκραξεν, ἐλάλησαν αἱ ἑπτὰ βρονταὶ τὰς ἑαυτῶν φωνάς (10:3b). These seven thun-

²² Job 11:9; Ps 144:6; Pr 8:29; Isa 42:10; Jonah 1:9.

²³ Some authors argue that the description was influenced by the colossus of Rhodes. David E. Aune, in an excursus consecrated to the relationship between the famous statue from the harbor of Rhodes and Rev 10, speaks about “many similarities” (*Revelation 6-16*, p. 556). The colossus was destroyed in 224 BC, but its fame lasted through the centuries. The chronicler John Malalas (Ἰωάννης Μαλάλας, c. 491-578 AD) affirms that Hadrian rebuilt the Colossus (*Χρονογραφία* 11, 18). Mary T. Boatwright considers his report “complete balderdash” (*Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 24).

ders are mentioned as known to the reader (note the definite article *αἱ*) even if until now no mention of them was made. In the Apocalypse we encounter two more times the comparison of a voice with the sound of thunder: One of the four living creatures (*ζῶα*) speaks with a voice like thunder (*ὡς φωνὴ βροντῆς*). The same comparison (*ὡς φωνὴν βροντῶν*) is used later for the heavenly voices praising God Almighty (Rev 19:6). These parallels do not fully clarify the significance of “the seven thunders”, but they allow us to understand the expression as a metaphor for heavenly being/beings uttering divine messages²⁴.

The message (or, at least, the words) they convey is understood by the prophet. He is ready to write it down (*ὅτε ἐλάλησαν αἱ ἑπτὰ βρονταί, ἤμελλον γράφειν*), but, as he is ordered to seal it up (v. 4: *ἤκουσα φωνὴν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ λέγουσαν· σφράγισον ἃ ἐλάλησαν αἱ ἑπτὰ βρονταί, καὶ μὴ αὐτὰ γράψῃς.*), it remains concealed²⁵. If one considers the fact that other occurrences of thunders in Rev are linked with punishments on earth (8:5; 16:18), one can reach the conclusion that their message may concern the mystery of the coming judgment²⁶. However, just at the beginning of the next great section (Rev 11:19), thunders (*βρονταί*) accompany the opening of the heavenly temple, which introduces the revelation of the great sign, the Woman-Mother of the Messiah and of all who keep God’s commandments.

In 2 Corinthians 12:4 St Paul says that the words he heard in heaven are so great that “it is not lawful for a man to utter” (KJV). Could the “sealing” order be motivated by the experience of such mysteries?

4. The oath of the mighty angel (vv. 5-7)

After the scene of the seven thunders, the mighty angel is introduced again and identified as the one seen on the sea and the earth (5a). He performs now the third action: he “raised his right hand to heaven” (*ἤρην τὴν χειρὰ αὐτοῦ τὴν δεξιάν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν – 10:5b*). The gesture of lifting up the right hand to heaven echoes similar scenes familiar from the OT. In Deut 32:40, God Himself mentions such a gesture: “I lift my hand to heaven and solemnly swear ...” (NIV).

Probably having the right hand still lifted up, the angel utters an oath which recalls Dan 12:7²⁷: “he swore (*ᾧμοσεν*) by him who lives for ever and ever (*ἐν*

²⁴ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 533.

²⁵ Cf. Dan 12:4, where the Prophet is ordered to “roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end” (NIV).

²⁶ George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 143.

²⁷ Dan 12:7: *ᾧψωσε τὴν δεξιάν καὶ τὴν ἀριστεράν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ᾧμοσε τὸν ζῶντα εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα Θεὸν (LXX); ᾧψωσεν τὴν δεξιάν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀριστεράν αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ᾧμοσεν ἐν τῷ ζῶντι τὸν αἰῶνα (Theodotion).*

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τῷ ζῶντι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων), who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it” (NIV).

The content of the oath seems to be rendered in St John’s words, not the angel’s. First, he warns that χρόνος οὐκέτι ἔσται (“there will be no more delay” – NIV, 10:6b). The wording is odd, but the message is quite clear if interpreted within the context of the whole book. Since the general background is the unfolding of God’s plan, the meaning should be that there will be no delay in its fulfillment²⁸. The idea is clarified in the next verse (10:7): “in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ Θεοῦ) will be accomplished (ἐτελέσθη), just as he announced to his servants the prophets (ὡς εὐηγγέλισεν τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ δούλους τοὺς προφήτας)” (NIV). The sounding of the seventh angel will occur in Rev 11:15 and it will bring no more punishments, but will introduce the proclamation of the instauration of God’s Kingdom: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah (ἐγένετο ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ κόσμου τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν καὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ), and he will reign for ever and ever” (NIV). This is the fulfillment of the μυστήριον τοῦ Θεοῦ (mystery of God), which was revealed to His servants, the prophets.

This μυστήριον is accomplished ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς φωνῆς τοῦ ἑβδόμου ἀγγέλου (10:7a). This chronological indication suggests that the sounding of the seventh angel encompasses a period of time. Actually these “days” cover the entire time needed for this accomplishment. Their number is specified in the next vision: 1260 days. The two witnesses – a symbol for the witnessing Church - prophesy for 1260 days. Or, this is precisely the duration of the period in which the Gentiles tread under their foot the holy city (Rev 11:2), the time of the refuge of the Woman-Church into the wilderness (Rev 12:6.14) and of the persecution of the saints (Rev 13:5-7). All these parallel images regard the entire earthly existence of the Church, and not only a limited period from its history. Therefore, the angel is referring to the time of the Church, the time during which the world can contemplate – in the words of Sf. Paul – the „revelation of the mystery” of God, kept secret from the beginning, but now made manifest (Rom 16:25-26).

In Daniel 2:29 God, called (in LXX) ὁ ἀνακαλύπτων μυστήρια (“the One who reveals mysteries”), reveals “what should happen” (ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι) to the king and then to his prophet. Interpreting the dream, Daniel points out that “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.” (Dan 2:44; NIV).

²⁸ Eugene Boring writes: “The time of waiting and hoping is over; the time of fulfillment already dawns.” (*Revelation* [Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching], Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989, p. 140).

5. The eating of the βιβλαρίδιον (vv. 8-11)

With the verse 8 we are introduced in the second part of the vision. Again the heavenly voice (the one which in v. 4b has prohibited John to write down what was said by the seven thunders) speaks to the prophet: “Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” It is for the third time when the mighty angel is described as the one who stands on earth and on sea. We have noted above some of the significances of this stance.

The double imperative ὕπαγε λάβε (go, take) and the seer’s active response (καὶ ἀπῆλθα πρὸς τὸν ἄγγελον λέγων αὐτῷ δοῦναί μοι τὸ βιβλαρίδιον, v. 9a) express more than a simple action. Accomplishing the order, he is advancing to a higher level in heaven’s work. Till now he was mostly a spectator; now he becomes an actor within the unfolding plan of God. And this quality presupposes not only acceptance but rather active appropriation.²⁹ The moving action from the initial place to the proximity of the mighty angel, i.e. the volunteer entering into a closer relationship with him, enables the prophet to take the βιβλαρίδιον.

The angel who holds the little booklet asks the prophet to take it and eat it. He warns him about the first consequence of the eating: “It will turn your stomach sour, but ‘in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.’” (πικρανεῖ σου τὴν κοιλίαν, ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ στόματί σου ἔσται γλυκὺ ὡς μέλι – 10:9b). The scene and the wording recall Ezekiel’s prophetic commissioning (Ezek 3:1-3). Till now St John’s own prophetic vocation has already been presented two times in ways which remind Ezekiel (Rev 1:10; 4:1-2).³⁰

As the angel foretold, the eating has a double effect: the scroll tastes sweet in the mouth of the prophet (ἦν ἐν τῷ στόματί μου ὡς μέλι γλυκὺ), but bitter in his stomach (ὅτε ἔφαγον αὐτό, ἐπικράνθη ἡ κοιλία μου – 10:10). Although this latter effect is not present in Ezekiel’s narrative, its context also speaks about the sensation of bitterness that the prophet was experiencing (Ezek 3:7).³¹ As for John, he had the same sensation seeing the incapability of the created world to provide the key to unlock the sevenfold sealed book (Apoc 5:4). The eating of the book puts him in a closer relationship with the work of the Lamb: he participates in His manifold work, which includes prophetic testimony, teaching, consolation, but also judgment. Prophecy for him does not only mean the uttering of some inspired

²⁹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (New Daily Study Bible), Westminster: John Knox, 1976, vol. 2, p. 56; Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, p. 139; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 208.

³⁰ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 550.

³¹ Jeremiah experiences similar feelings: “Your words were found and I ate them, and they became for me a joy and the delight of my heart... You filled me with anger” (15:16-17).

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messages, but involves one's entire life:³² one's very existence must become a prophetic testimony.

The eating of the little booklet enables the prophet to receive a new order: he must "prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings" (10:11; NRSV), a formula which in Revelation conveys the idea of universality. Normally here one would expect to see how the prophet is trying to accomplish this task. Instead, he puts before the reader/hearer the image of the measuring of the temple and the allegorical narrative about the two witnesses, through which he outlines the mission of the Church in the world.

6. A Christological perspective

Based on the appearance and the power of this angel and on biblical and traditional possible parallels, some interpreters consider as most suitable the identification of the ἄλλον ἄγγελον ἰσχυρόν with Jesus Christ Himself³³. But most scholars reject this thesis mainly based on the consideration that in Rev Jesus Christ is never presented as angel. An angel in Rev is always an angel and nothing more, they seem to say. This impression is reinforced if one remembers how careful the author is to avoid any possible misunderstanding of the status of the angels: When the Prophet John falls down to worship the angel, the reaction of the last one is unambiguous: "Don't do that! I am a fellow servant (σύνδουλός) with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God! (τῷ Θεῷ προσκύνησον)" (Rev 22:9; cf. Rev 19:10). The argument is powerful, but it does not solve the problem. No doubt, the term ἄγγελος deserves our whole attention, but the divine/Christological characteristics we have pointed out above require the same consideration. Therefore, as one can easily note, the problem could be solved only if the tension between the two perspectives could be removed. Is that possible? The Holy Scripture, the Holy Tradition and modern

³² Christopher C. Rowland, "The Book of Revelation", in: *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon, vol. XII, 1998, p. 646.

³³ The first commentator who defends it is St Victorinus of Pettau (+303 AD), also known as Victorinus Petavionensis or Victorinus Poetovionensis. See his *Commentarius in Apocalypsim*, in J. Haussleiter, ed., *Victorinus Episcopi Petavionensis Opera* (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 49), Leipzig: Freytag, 1916, p. 89; English translation: *ANF VII*, p. 804. This is the oldest commentary on St John's Revelation that we have. St Victorinus was bishop of Poetovium (today Ptuj, in Slovenia) and died as a martyr under Diocletian, around 303 AD. This interpretation was taken over by Tychonius (*In Apocalypsin*, written in c. 385 AD), Primasius (*Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, c. 540). Among the modern scholars who defend it are E. F. Scott, *The Book of Revelation*, London: SCM, 1939, p. 219; Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966, p. 223 and Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 522 ff.

scholarship provide valuable hints for answering this important question. At least four points deserve special attention.

(1) The main argument against the Christological interpretation is that for the author of the Book of Revelation the angel is always an angel. This conclusion is too hasty and it ignores the peculiar ways St John uses to express his theology. In the same way one could say that in the same book God is always God and nothing else, and based on this affirmation to reject the divinity of Christ. It is true that St John does not directly assert the divinity of Christ, but he expresses it clearly by applying to Him the titles and images he uses for God³⁴. And this is only one of the many particularities of the Christology of the Apocalypse, where the same Risen Christ can be presented as μάρτυς (witness/martyr – 1:5) and βασιλεὺς βασιλέων (king of kings, 19:16), as ὅμοιον υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου (like [the] Son of Man – 1:13) and ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ (the Son of God – 2:18), as λέων (lion) and ἀρνίον (lamb – 5:5-6), as horseman (6:2; 19:11)³⁵ and the Word of God (19:13) a.o. If one considers this variety, the question which arises immediately is: Why an author who can put together such a variety of titles and images, building up an impressive Christology, could not use the word ‘angel’ for the same purpose?

(2) In the Greek version of Isa 9:5 Messiah is called μεγάλης βουλής ἄγγελος (“the Angel of the great counsel”).³⁶ Here the noun ἄγγελος must be taken as a title or as indicative of function; it clearly does not denote the nature of the Messiah. Taken in its etymological sense, the term fits Christ, as He is the One sent out by the Father (John 8:18) in the world to bring the good news (εὐ-αγγέλιον) of salvation, to bring the word of God, being Himself the very Word of God (John 1:1f.; Rev 19:13). One should ask: if Christ could be called Ἀποστολός (as in Heb 3:1) in order to point out that His whole work in the world could be seen as the fulfillment of the mission (ἀποστολή) that the Father entrusted Him, why should St John avoid the use of the meaningful noun ἄγγελος, so close in meaning to the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι, already used by Jesus Himself to describe his prophetic work (Matt 11:5 = Lk 7:22; Lk 4:18.43; 16:16)?

(3) In Daniel, a book which massively inspired the author of the Apocalypse, we encounter a very interesting angelic figure which could be relevant for the understanding of the mighty angel of Rev 10. In the fiery furnace in which he has thrown the three young men, the king Nebuchadnezzar sees a fourth one whose appearance is “like unto the Son of God” (ἡ ὄρασις τοῦ τετάρτου ὁμοία

³⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 54f.

³⁵ On the Christological interpretation of Rev 6:2, see footnote 20.

³⁶ The Hebrew text looks quite different: Messiah is named “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”.

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υἱὸς Θεοῦ – Dan 3:25; LXX and Theodotion). The reaction of the king is to bring “praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Who has sent His angel (ὃς ἀπέστειλε τὸν ἄγγελον αὐτοῦ) and rescued His servants (ἔσωσε τοὺς παῖδας αὐτοῦ)” (Dan 3:28/95). It is worth noting that this text has been interpreted Christologically in the Tradition of the Church³⁷, the salvation of those thrown in the fiery furnace being seen as a type for the salvation brought by Christ. This is why, in art, sometimes the angel in the fiery furnace is represented with the traditional characteristics of Christ. And the same reason lies behind the setting of this narrative among the liturgical readings of Great Saturday³⁸.

(4) All these parallels enforce the Christological perspective toward which we were already driven along the analysis of the text. However, the Christological interpretation alone does not solve the puzzle of our text entirely. But the identification of this character with an angelic being, even with a „mighty one”, as the “angel of the Lord” or one of the archangels, raises even more problems. What is clear is that modern scholarship finds in the inspired text of St John support for each of these interpretations. But each one has its weak point. It is obvious that we have here one of the many paradoxical images of the Revelation: an extraordinary angel is portrayed with Christological elements. Why this ambiguity? Above we have pointed out the peculiar ways St John uses for expressing a very high Christology. For him Christ is the center of the history. From the moment of the fulfilment of His salvific work nothing can be understood without Him. Both the Church and the world are under His absolute sovereignty. The angels play an important role in the progress of God’s plan, but everything they do is directly connected to the Glorified Christ. The “revelation” (ἀποκάλυψις) St John brings to the Church is “of Jesus Christ”; He has made it known to John through His angel (Rev 1:1). Both the angel and John are Christ’s servants. That’s why, addressing to the Prophet John, the angel names him “fellow servant” (σύνδουλος – Rev 22:9). The little book/scroll the angel brings to him is close related to the book/scroll which no one can open, excepting the Victorious Lamb (Rev 5:1f.). The power to take it and to open its seven seals is both the consequence and the expression of Christ’s sovereign work in history. Now, through His angel (cf. Rev 1:1; 22:16), Jesus Christ calls up His servant John and assigns him a new prophetic mission. That is why, through the Christological characteristics introduced one by one, the figure

³⁷ It is noteworthy that this traditional interpretation, represented among other authorities by St Hippolytus and John Chrysostom, “has been generally given up by modern Christian commentators” (James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Daniel*, The International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927, p. 215).

³⁸ *Triodul*, București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2000, pp. 684-687.

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of the angel becomes more and more transparent, so that, beyond him the reader/hearer can see Christ Himself³⁹, Whose fellow-servants are the two messengers. Our text points out the same revelatory chain we have already encountered in Rev 1:1: Christ's message is revealed by the angel to John, and the Prophet, in his turn, brings it to the world. Both the angel and John are co-workers (cf. 1 Cor 3:9) with Christ in the great work He is performing in the human history.

7. Conclusions

The above exegetic-theological approach of Rev 10 guides inevitably to the conclusion that St John purposely presents the angel through whom receives this new prophetic calling with characteristics which recall the image of Jesus Christ. His intention becomes clear if we consider the larger context of the book. From the beginning to the end, St John takes care to show forth that the Risen and Glorified Christ has absolute sovereignty over the history and that He is actively present into the life of the world, in middle of which his people, in close relationship with Himself, is called to fulfill its prophetic mission. In the second part of the section to which our text belongs, the mystery of the prophetic-witnessing work of the Church in the world is revealed (Rev 11:1f.). Build-up through the whole salvific work of Christ, the Church is actualizing this work in the history. In this process, the prophetic ministry is extremely important. In the first part of the book we see John fulfilling a prophetic mission in the Church in a moment into which its prophetic work is seriously affected by different weaknesses. The narrative of chapter 10 has as main goal to point out the new prophetic calling of John. If the first one was received directly from Jesus Christ (Rev 1:10f.), this time he is called through an angel. But the inspired prophet is able to see more than one would expect. Beyond the angel he sees the One Who has sent him. Thus, the messenger (the angel) becomes both an "extension" of Christ and a "window" towards Him⁴⁰. The Holy Scripture and the Tradition of the Church point out the role of the angels in the human knowledge of God. The „mighty angel" is seen fulfilling exactly such a role. Through His faithful servant, the „mighty angel", Christ the Lord is revealing

³⁹ Eugene Boring (*Revelation*, p. 139) goes further and sees a transparency which allows us to see not only Jesus Christ, but also God, as in Rev 1:1.

⁴⁰ Eugene Boring speaks about a "collapsing" of the images of God, Christ, Spirit and angel into each other: "As in 1:1-2 and throughout Revelation, the images of God, Christ, Spirit/angel collapse into each other. The ultimate Revealer is God, who defines and represents himself in Christ and communicates with the prophet by means of the angel. Although the figures are kept somewhat distinct, the imagery overlaps in such a way that God/Christ/angel are presented to the mind's eye by the one picture." (*Revelation*, p. 139).

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Himself again⁴¹. That is why the figure of the angel is so transparent to the image of the Glorified Christ.

⁴¹ Worth noting is the fact that the Greek expression which opens the book - ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ - can be translated both by “revelation of Jesus Christ” and “revelation about Jesus Christ”. The revelation of ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει (“what must soon take place” – Rev 1:1) inevitably include revelations about Himself, because from His victory forward the history cannot be separated from the One Who leads it according to God’s eternal salvific plan.