

Identifying the *Great Voice* in Rev 21:3a

Andreas Hoeck S.S.D.

*Fr Andreas Hoeck is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Scripture at
St John Vianney Theological Seminary, Colorado.*

[father.hoeck@archden.org]

A rather thorny issue is the identification of the ‘loud voice from the throne’ (*NJB*; φωνῆ μεγάλη ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου, *GNT*; ‘vox magna de throno’, *NVg*) that makes its appearance in the book of the Apocalypse of Saint John (Rev. 21:3a). The majority of commentators argue that it is not opportune to attempt to identify the subject of this voice.¹

However, we opine that the matter deserves a closer look not least due to the portrayal of the throne in Rev 20:11:

I saw a great white throne and the One who was sitting on it. In his presence, earth and sky vanished, leaving no trace (*NJB*).

First of all, this seemingly mysterious agent is not incorporated into the schematic description of the line of communication in Rev 1:1, and thus appears to be unquestionably of minor importance in the revelatory process as such. Yet, the intensity of performance (μεγάλης) and the momentous character of its message – directly preceding the divine voice in Rev 21:6-8 – suggests its

¹ E.g. J.-P. Charlier, *Comprendre l'Apocalypse* (tome II, Paris, 1991), p. 203: ‘La voix qui sort du trône est anonyme et il n’est ni sage ni utile d’essayer de préciser. L’important n’est pas de savoir qui parle, mais de connaître son autorité. C’est celle du trône de Dieu et donc le message participe à sa solennité.’ Also C. Deutsch, ‘Transformation of Symbols: The New Jerusalem in Rv 21,1 – 22,5,’ *ZNW* 78 (1987) 106-126: ‘The voice from the throne in 21,3 is neither God nor Christ [...]. Unidentified voices occur elsewhere in Revelation (10,4.8; 11,12; 12,10; 14,2.13; 18,4; from the throne in 16,17; 19,5)’ (quotation is from p. 110); R.L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22, An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, 1995), p. 443: ‘As in that earlier case [19:5], it is impossible to identify whose voice it is, but it is not the voice of God who begins to speak for the first time in 21:5’; see also P. Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* (Commentaire du NT, 2, XIV, Lausanne and Paris, 1981), p. 327; David Aune speaks of a ‘motif of an unidentified voice’ referring to Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature: D. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Word Biblical Commentary 52b, Nashville, 1998), pp. 561-62.

weighty role within the present discourse.² Its superlative content, Rev 21:3b-4, arouses deep excitement and curiosity:

Look, here God lives among human beings. He will make his home among them; they will be his people, and he will be their God, God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone. (*NJB*)

This concrete communication now taking place by virtue of a loud voice issuing from that splendidly white throne is personally addressed to the apostolic seer on the island of Patmos as can be gathered from the ἴδου, in Rev 21:3b.³ While the grand phenomenon is speaking to John it points to a visual experience, thereby conjoining audition and vision. The audience targeted is all of humanity: ‘the home of God is among mortals’ (*NRSV*).

Two queries should be resolved by means of the context: (i) *which* throne is meant here? (ii) to which *subject* does the voice relate? The answer to these questions will influence the elucidation of the message.

As to (i): the nearest preceding occurrence is 20:11 as quoted above, καὶ εἶδον θρόνον μέγαν λευκὸν καὶ τὸν καθήμενον ἐπ’ αὐτόν, οὗ ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου ἔφυγεν ἡ γῆ καὶ ὁ οὐρανός καὶ τόπος οὐχ εὔρεθη αὐτοῖς (*GNT*).⁴ Incidentally, the careful distinction made in this verse between the ‘great white throne’ and the ‘One seated on it’ finds its continuation in Rev 21:3a.5a. Thus the definite article in Rev 21:3a ought to be interpreted as being directly tied up with Rev 20:11.⁵ and only indirectly with all the numerous preceding occurrences, especially Rev 4:2ff.⁶ Farther ahead in the text, Rev 22:1.3, there is a throne present in the Heavenly City as the object of another vision. Undeniably, the divine throne and not the throne of the beast, Rev 13:2, or one of the thrones of

² W.J. Harrington, *The Apocalypse of John, A Commentary* (London, Dublin and Melbourne, 1969), p. 251: ‘The great voice is not easily identified; it may be that of one of the living creatures, or of an ‘angel of the presence’. It explains the significance of the vision.’

³ It puts too much strain on the text to affirm that ‘the voices of Revelation, both the variety of those heard in the vision and John’s own this-worldly voice, do not remain distinct, but fade into each other. This is not typical of apocalyptic literature. This phenomenon suggests that John regards the whole of his document in the prophetic perspective as the word of John/Christ/God *simultaneously*’: M.E. Boring, ‘The Voice of Jesus in the Apocalypse of John,’ *NT* 34,4 (1992) 334-359 (quotation is from p. 344).

⁴ See the variant reading οὐρανοῦ (as in 051^s, M gig sy co; Ambr Prim) instead of θρόνου: Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, (Stuttgart, ²⁶1991), p. 675; no variant exists for the *NVg*, however.

⁵ Note the missing definite article in 20:11.

⁶ Already in Rev 1:4 the ‘throne’ is introduced preceded by the definite article which implies a retrospective referral to the Old Testament, cf. Ezek. 1; Isa. 6; Ps. 2; 109.

the elders, Rev 4:4, is meant. With this presupposition then let us examine the second question concerning *whose* voice is heard?

Well, the phrases ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου⁷ (Rev 21:3a) and ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ⁸ (Rev 20:11; 21:5) suggest a distinction between the throne as such and the voice's subject. In other words, the throne is not supposed to be dramatically personified,⁹ as is the case for instance in Rev 9:13, where a voice originates from the very horns of the altar. Since the expression ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου is rare in the book¹⁰ – and this is the only instance a voice comes out of it – one is arguably entitled to search for an agent or an active subject residing within it. Now, in Rev 4:6 four living creatures are noticed ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου. This is, in fact, the lone mention regarding any creatures within the throne.¹¹ One might connect them with the voices of Rev 21:3, and yet those former voices do not own up to being μεγάλη. Moreover, the living creatures are also seen as worshiping in front of the throne while another voice comes forth ἀπὸ τοῦ θρόνου in Rev 19:4.5.

Some commentators maintain that the subject could be *God* himself expressing his own reflections on Old Testament prophecy anticipating its fulfillment. This might be confirmed by Rev 21:5, where 'the one sitting on the throne' is clearly the speaker. There is an additional association with Rev 16:17 since the declaration of Rev 21:3 continues in v. 6 with Rev 16:17's 'it is done' (γέγοναν, now plural rather than singular). However, the focus now is not on judgment – though that is not lost sight of (21:1.8.27) – but on the consummate blessing of God's people.¹²

Is it the *Lamb* himself (ἐν μέσῳ, Rev 5:6, or ἀνὰ μέσον, Rev 7:17)? But then again, nowhere in the Book of Revelation does the Lamb pronounce a word. Therefore, it would be rather exceptional to presume him as the sudden actant here.¹³ Also, it seems implausible that the Lamb should talk about God in the third person as is the case in Rev 21:3-4.

⁷ A so-called *ablative of source*, cf. J.A. Brooks, and C.L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham, 1988), 24.

⁸ As a *locative of place*, cf. Brooks and Winbery, *Syntax* 38.

⁹ Philonenko argues that Rev 21:3 is the throne *personified*, cf. Philonenko, M., 'Une voix sortit du Trône qui disait ... (Apocalypse de Jean 19,5a),' *RHPR* 79,1 (1999) 83-89.

¹⁰ Cf. the cosmic phenomena issuing from it in Rev 4:5, and the river in Rev 22:1b.

¹¹ Hall maintains that "the living creatures are in the midst of the throne not as occupants but as components of it", R.G. Hall, 'Living creatures in the midst of the throne: another look at Revelation 4.6,' *NTS* 36 (1990) 609-613 (quotation is from p. 613).

¹² See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. 1046.

¹³ Cf. Deutsch, 'Transformation', 110.

In due course two options remain: either declare this voice as *unidentifiable* on the grounds that no explanation is really satisfying,¹⁴ or else, to identify it with the voice of one of the *living creatures* as broached above already.¹⁵ This second position would find support in the following five theoretical reasons:

- 1) Only a non-divine and non-human subject is likely to express itself in the terms of Rev 21:3-4, using the third person, although there do exist occurrences in the Apocalypse where a human being talks about God in the third person as in Rev 5:12.13; more often than not in the second person, however. At any rate, the solemn style of the pronouncement rules out any creature short of the highest-ranking ones.¹⁶
- 2) The last septenary of the book, that of the vials of wrath, sees one living creature commanding the seven bowl-angels to execute their mission, Rev 15:7; 16:1, supplying us also with a contextual link to the apparition of one of this group as *angelus interpretes* to John in Rev 21:9a.
- 3) Nowhere in the Apocalypse is a human being said to reside within the throne.
- 4) Conversely, exclusively the living creatures are found within the throne.
- 5) The proximity of these beings to the divine majesty is reflected etymologically in their names, ζῶα, that is, ‘living beings’, indicating also an ontological propinquity to God.

Summarizing then this succinct biblical analysis, the voice can be recognized with virtual certainty as appertaining to one of the living creatures, from whom we are entitled to expect a message of prominence.¹⁷ And, as a matter of fact, that is exactly what these mysterious beings do: they chant the *Trishagion* (Rev 4:8), they prostrate in perennial worship in the presence of the ‘One seated on

¹⁴ This is the explanation offered by Thomas, *Revelation* 8-22, p. 443; Harrington simply states: ‘As in 19:5 the voice is not identified. It explains the significance of the vision’: W.J. Harrington, *Revelation* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 207.

¹⁵ Beale somewhat surprisingly says that the voice is coming from the cherubim around the throne, *Revelation*, p. 1046.

¹⁶ Comparable to Gabriel who announces the Incarnation, Luk 1:26-38 (note the future tense).

¹⁷ In agreement with Wikenhauser: ‘Eine Stimme aus dem Himmel (wahrscheinlich eines der vier Lebewesen) gibt nun dem Seher über den Sinn und Zweck des Geschauten, insbesondere des neuen Jerusalem, Auskunft’, A. Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Regensburger Neues Testament 9; Regensburg, ³1959), p. 155.

the throne' (Rev 4:9; 7:12; 19:4), they confirm the angels' hymn (Rev 5:14), and invite the apocalyptic riders to carry out their mission (Rev 6:1.3.5.7). And so also here, in grand fashion, a voice from the throne interprets the vision by resuming and renewing former promises (see Lev 26:11-12; Ezek 37:27; cf. 2 Cor 6:16).¹⁸

¹⁸ Cf. R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer and R.E. Murphy (eds), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 1015; 'One of the four living creatures gives an explanation of the new creation', R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer and R.E. Murphy (eds), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968) 64:88.