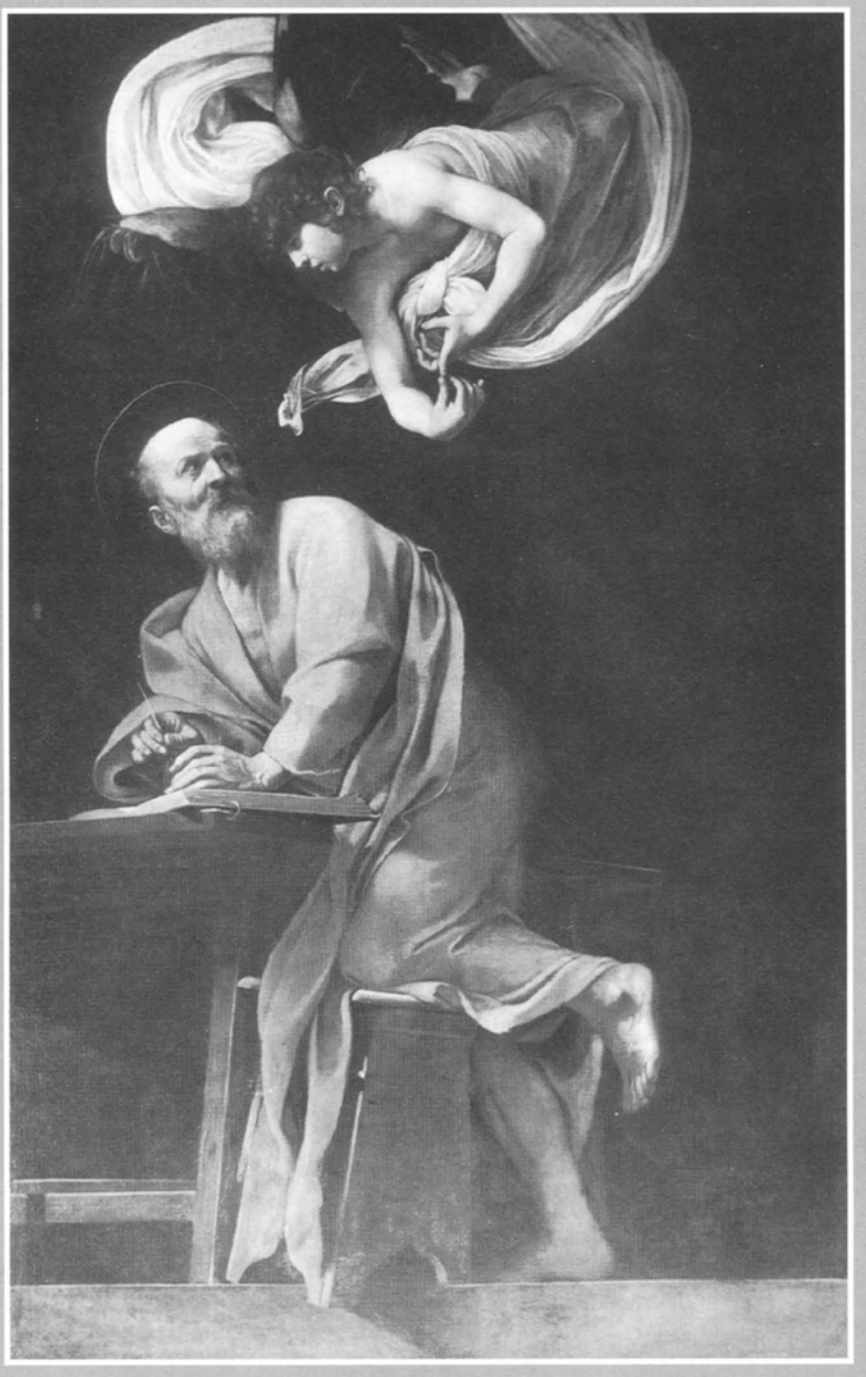

A MESSAGE FROM CARAVAGGIO

A Symposium on Revelation

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON • KATHLEEN NORRIS
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As the controversy surrounding the Jesus Seminar suggests, the historical-critical methods employed by modern biblical scholars have raised profound questions about the nature of revelation. Is Scripture a human product, or divine—or is this either/or altogether too simple? What sense can we make of revelation given all the human and historical circumstances we now know went into Scripture's composition? We need a new—or renewed—understanding of revelation's power and truth.

Toward this end, we have asked a handful of contributors to reflect on the idea of revelation, and to do so by reference to Caravaggio's great painting, *Saint Matthew and the Angel* (*circa* 1603), in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. What can it tell us about revelation? Does this painting give us a window on revelation's nature?

In *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, Caravaggio gives us a man of flesh and blood, with throbbing feet and a weathered face. And he gives us drama. According to a medieval legend, Matthew's Gospel had been dictated to him by an angel. But in Caravaggio's presentation of this story, it is possible to see in Matthew's expression a kind of resistance to his otherworldly messenger. Is this pride? Or is it, perhaps, fidelity to revelation's ongoing truth? BERNARD G. PRUSAK

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Luke Timothy Johnson

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Caravaggio captures the truth of revelation in much the same way that Scripture itself does, not by providing a blueprint of its mechanics, but by constructing an imaginative space in which the hard surface of things is given depth and shadow so that the wing and whirl of another more profound intelligence, more urgent love, more compelling power, may somehow have room to move.

The living God who creates all at every moment and presses on all creation seeking to disclose the truth that lies beneath the contingency of things, this God cannot be contained directly and surely not adequately by any creature, and so must be disclosed in such moments as this: in a flash of light in a darkened room that one glimpses—while rising from study and putting away the laborious pen—over one's left shoulder, so that one is twisted and unbalanced and anxious, and perhaps a bit embarrassed, trying to catch the urgent whisper of this alarmingly well-fleshed and apparently adolescent messenger from beyond whose ears and fingers are so distractingly red.

The critical study of Scripture has enabled us to appreciate just how fragile and partial, embodied and particular, mediated and dialogical, all revelation must be, not because of a deficiency either in God's self-disclosure or in human receptivity, but because the fragile and the partial, the embodied and the particular, the slow and sometimes unsteady process of mediation and dialogue is at the heart of the mystery of God's shaping, sustaining, saving, and sanctifying presence to creation.

Coming to see the profoundly human character of Scripture does not detract from revelation—just the opposite. It frees us from the fantasy of a false completeness, of a message from God wrapped in eternal verities and stamped with doubt-free postage, and frees us also for an appreciation of the way in which every odd encounter and every ordinary routine can be a visitation to which we must attend.

Take the painting as a parable. We can choose to observe only the surface representation and conclude that Caravaggio, unschooled in higher criticism, was wrong about the process of Gospel composition. Matthew, we reply, was not an angel's scribe but the head of a scribal school that edited Mark's Gospel in order to meet the needs facing his church. We despise the painting for not meeting our standards of historical accuracy. And nothing is revealed to us, for we have not known the painting as an artistic rendering, but have twisted it to our own impoverished epistemology.

Alternatively, we can imagine as the painter imagined, see as the painter saw, and can almost touch the furrowed brow of Matthew, the awed attention, the effort to comprehend what always escapes full comprehension. And with senses so alive and imagination so engaged, we can both see in the ancient texts and hear in the voices of adolescent boys the truth of God's presence seeking an opening for a space in our hearts.

Kathleen Norris

Kathleen Norris's most recent book is Cloister Walk *(Riverhead). She lives in Lemmon, South Dakota.*

The best definition of revelation that I know is found in the great liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanaugh's potent book, *On Liturgical Theology*: "It was a Presence, not faith, which drew Moses to the burning bush. And what happened there was a revelation, not a seminar." Caravaggio's painting reveals an or-

dinary human being experiencing the unknown and unknowable, the mystery we call divine. And Matthew answers with his whole body: His brow wrinkles, his hand and leg muscles tense up. This is what we might call inspiration—not a vague, dreamy state in which a greeting-card angel appears like the Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio* to grant us our dearest desire, but an attentive response to God's presence.

Matthew is captured at the most intense moment of inspiration, when the words demand to flow as if from the heart and mind, down the arm and to the hand, from the pen onto the page. It is a moment recognizable to any writer; only later, upon reflection, might one begin to see that one has not progressed immediately from ignorance to revelation, but recognize that the new words have coalesced out of stories and circumstances that have been a part of one's life for some time. Angels do not dictate poems, or even holy Scripture. Human language is limited, flawed, conditional. Yet it is the way God chooses to speak to us. The picture tells a story of encounter, of words incarnating, becoming flesh.

Sandra M. Schneiders

Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., is professor of New Testament studies and spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology and the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. She is the author of The Revelatory Text *(HarperSanFrancisco).*

If we "read" Caravaggio's painting literally (which is precisely how a painting should not be viewed), we would conclude that biblical inspiration means divine dictation, directly or through a messenger such as an angel, of the content of the biblical book. Modern biblical scholars, for good historical reasons, would reject such an explanation of the origins of the Bible. A clue, however, that this painting is not an attempt to give a literal account of inspiration is the "unrealistic" position of Saint Matthew: No one writes a book half-standing at one's desk! The dramatic tension between Matthew and the angel suggests that two energies are in dialogue here: the very human evangelist with workbench and writing materials, and the winged messenger from the divine realm.

Historical criticism can tell us a great deal about the human processes of composition that produced the biblical books. But we have to turn to theology for reflection on the interaction of divine and human agency in the production of the sacred literature which Christians regard as privileged witness to the divine revelation which occurred in the history of Israel, Jesus, and the early church.

The term "inspiration" is a code word for an entire field of theological discussion about the special character of the Bible as word of God in human words. It is crucial to distinguish between the church's constant faith in the *fact that* the Bible is both inspired by God and a fully human product, and the various *theories* that have been developed about

how the divine-human cooperation occurred which makes this book unique. The situation is not unlike confessing *that* Jesus is fully divine and fully human without ever being able to explain the *how* of the Incarnation.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that the church claimed the Bible as a special witness to divine revelation first, and later explained this claim in terms of inspiration (as it first recognized the revelation of God in Jesus and gradually developed the doctrine of Incarnation). In other words, it was not some objective criterion that could be observed in this text and not in others that led the church to recognize the Bible as inspired; it was because the church recognized this book as its sacred text that the church claimed it was inspired. This suggests that the statement "the Bible is inspired" is not a scientific or historical statement but a faith statement. And it is not possible (or necessary) to prove the truth of this kind of statement.

The real question is: What does the church intend to say by the faith statement that the Bible is inspired? Essentially, this statement is a claim that this book, approached in faith, is somehow a privileged mediator of the encounter with God that we call revelation. Caravaggio's painting captures well a dimension of that encounter. There is a dynamic tension between the human and the divine in the experience of revelation. Because the divine is mediated in and through the human, there is always the ambivalence of our yearning for and our resistance to the divine. Like Matthew in the painting, we grasp the pen of our human initiative even as we respond to an initiative more powerful than our own.

Donald Senior

Donald Senior, C.P., is professor of New Testament at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. His book The Gospel of Matthew *was recently published by Abingdon Press.*

For twenty-five years, a copy of *Saint Matthew and the Angel* has hung on the wall of my office, a gift from my parents when I completed my dissertation on Matthew's Gospel.

I love this painting. It portrays the evangelist, listening carefully and perhaps even nervously, trying to catch every word as the angel dictates the Gospel, ticking off points on angelic fingers as if Matthew were a stenographer. Perhaps Matthew is in awe, too, as the Gospel's majestic story of Jesus falls into place—from the wondrous events of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and his great sermon to the crowds on a Galilean mountain, to the heart-clutching events of death and resurrection in Jerusalem and, from another Galilean mountain, the final commission sending the disciples into the world.

For the artist, Matthew's Gospel, along with the rest of the Bible, was inspired and inspiring. And so the angel, emblematic of God's Spirit, dictates to the evangelist. Even if our theological sophistication outstrips Caravaggio's painting, this fundamental faith assertion remains: Scripture is God's inspired word, normative for Christian tradition as no other texts can claim to be.

And yet Caravaggio's portrait does not reveal the whole truth. Matthew is not simply a scribe, taking divine dictation. Perhaps the artist sensed this—he makes Matthew such a compelling figure. The man who earned that lined face filled with character doesn't strike you as the kind of person content simply to write things down. There is more to inspiration than that. The Spirit that led Matthew to compose his Gospel was present in a host of other people and circumstances that shaped this story of Jesus. Ultimately we have to reach back to the first generation of disciples who listened to Jesus' words and witnessed his messianic deeds. Then there were all of the catechists, parents, community leaders, mystics, and prophets in the developing Christian community who handed on these stories about Jesus and gave them new layers of understanding and depth. And of course there was Matthew's own community with its particular circumstances, perhaps located in Antioch in Syria, perhaps a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians, trying to move forward in history, faithful to Jesus but also encountering unanticipated turns and tensions in the journey. And then we have Matthew himself (or an anonymous Christian author?) who draws together his sources (Mark's Gospel and a collection of sayings?) and tells with new freshness and majesty the story of Jesus—a story so effective, so penetrating, that the whole church would never let it slip from its hands.

Whatever metaphysical explanation we attempt to give for the process of inspiration, it must extend not simply to the evangelist who wrote the Gospel but to the entire cast of Christians who lovingly and faithfully handed on that tradition prior to the writing of the Gospel and left on it the imprint of their faith. In the shadows, behind Matthew and his angelic muse, stands this unseen chorus of Spirit-guided Christians, our ancestors in faith.

Susan A. Ross

Susan A. Ross is associate professor of theology at Loyola University, Chicago. She is currently writing a book on women and sacraments.

What strikes me about this painting: Saint Matthew seems to be caught off-guard; the book is half off the table, the bench (which is for sitting) is tipping over as he half-kneels on it. Matthew looks as if he had been in the middle of something else, and then rushed to his table, not even taking the time to sit down, sharpen his pencils (or quills), and do all of the things that writers do to forestall actually putting pen (or quills) to paper. The angel is definitely on a mission, already enumerating exactly what needs to be said. Matthew doesn't look happy with this whole arrangement. He is listening, to be sure, and his quill is poised, but he's ready to run.

What does this say about revelation: It's not neat and predictable; it doesn't come on schedule; we're not ready for it. Perhaps Matthew would have preferred to be sitting in a comfortable chair, puffing on his pipe, calmly reminiscing about (and perhaps embroidering too) the old stories about Jesus that he is preparing to commit to paper. I know I would. But the angel comes with the *urgency* of this message: "First this, then this, then this...and make sure to get the genealogy straight!" This painting seems to be saying that the power of God's word comes and grabs us, even when we'd most like to think the whole thing through carefully, prepare an outline, do a draft, run it by a few friends for review—but the angel, who is God's presence among us, will have none of this.

I'm spending the year on sabbatical, writing, and I've perfected innumerable ways of avoiding facing the blank page by doing more and more reading, more research, more outlines. I identify with Matthew, who seems to find the writing process tortuous. And while I make no claims that my own attempts to communicate something of the Christian message are on any par with the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, I think we're struggling with some of the same things: the need to listen, the need to attend to the writing *now*, and perhaps most especially the need to trust that, despite our reluctance, our lack of preparedness and confidence, we are God's vessels, God's media of revelation. This is the paradoxical dimension of revelation: that it is from God—whom we imagine accompanied by angels on flowing wings of glory—but that it is expressed in and by the frail, reluctant people who are its recipients. □

SCREEN

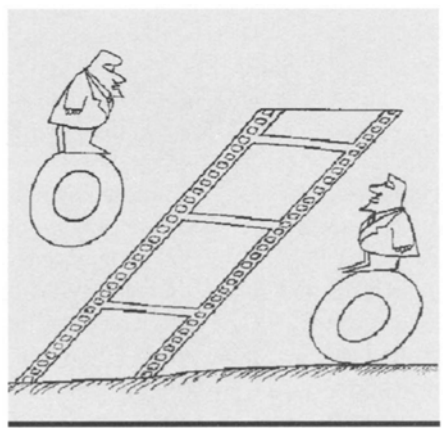
Richard Alleva

DIRECTORS AS WRITERS

Beresford's 'Road' & Lumet's 'Night'

Bruce Beresford's *Paradise Road* is about the struggle of female prisoners-of-war—Brits, Dutch, Australians, a few Americans and Asians, and one German Jew—to stay alive and to remain civilized in a Japanese POW camp after the fall of Singapore in 1942. Before the film is ten minutes under way, it becomes clear that scriptwriter Beresford understands director Beresford very well, caters to his strengths, incites his visual power, and, when need be, keeps out of his way.

Beresford writes good, flavorsome, pointed dialogue. Example: When Japanese officers tempt some of the starving women to prostitute themselves for food and softer living conditions, and one of them steps forward in capitulation, the unofficial leader of the women (Glenn Close) intercepts her by saying, "Don't be *absurd*." Obviously Close could have uttered something like, "Don't lower yourself," but "absurd" is the *mot juste*. To sell one's body for the sake of preserving one's body is for her unthinkable, impossible, absurd. One adjective encapsulates a code of honor.



But though Beresford has done skillful adaptations of plays such as *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Breaker Morant*, he has never been a photographer of talking heads. He continues to write—with images—long after the dialogue stops. And, as viewers of *Black Robe* know, this filmmaker has a pronounced talent for visualizing the extremes of cruelty and compassion. In *Paradise Road*, this talent is unstintingly on tap in service to the movie's theme: beauty as preservation and certification of sanity and civilization in the face of unremitting cruelty.

The rigors of the POW camp are searingly presented. Always we are kept aware that any moment of respite from labor—a quick nap, a brief chat—can be canceled by blows or much worse. Beresford can wrest horrible beauty from the most egregious sights. When an Asian woman is burnt alive for illicitly obtaining quinine for the sick, her body, for one heartstopping instant, seems to plunge out from the flames like a surfer riding a wave. But the director refuses to end this excruciating scene on a note