

**MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES
IN *JOHANNES OFFENBARUNG*
BY JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER¹**

Słowa kluczowe: Johann Gottfried Herder – oświeceniowa egzegeza biblijna – Herder komentator Biblii – Herder i Apokalipsa św. Jana – Ap 2–3

Key words: Johann Gottfried Herder – Enlightenment biblical exegesis – Herder as a Bible commentator – Herder and Revelation – Rev 2–3

Schlüsselwörter: Johann Gottfried von Herder – Aufklärung Bibelexegese – Herder als Bibelkommentator – Herder und Johannesapokalypse – Apk 2–3

INTRODUCTION

Johann Gottfried Herder ranks among the people of Warmia and Mazury who left an imprint on the history of their region. Born in 1744 in Mohrunen (now Morąg), in a non-affluent Lutheran family, Herder was baptised in St Peter and Paul's Church.² That parish church was the starting point on the journey of his life and his ministry, which took him across Königsberg, Riga, and Bückenburg to finally stop in Weimar. In spite of the dark clouds looming on the horizon of culture and religion, Herder himself remained a bright spot. Thanks to his broad-based education and an unusual brilliance of mind, artistic sensibility and diligence, he left a diverse and substantial literary legacy. In Poland, he is known as a philosopher of the Enlightenment,³

* Fr. Marek Karczewski – Associated Professor, Professor at University of Warmia and Mazury, Department of Biblical Theology, Faculty of Theology at UWM in Olsztyn.

¹ This study expands and complements the text contained in: *Siedem bram. Komentarz do Apokalipsy 2–3 według "Johannes Offenbarung" Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera*, in: *Veritatem revelare. Księga Pamiątkowa dedykowana ks. S. Ewertowskiemu w 40-lecie święceń kapłańskich i 65-lecie urodzin*, ed. M. Karczewski, S. Mikołajczak, J. Ruciński, Faculty of Theology UWM, Olsztyn 2017, p. 107–118.

² Currently, that parish church is a valuable monument in the town of Morąg, see: W. Szymański, A. Rzymaska, *Kościół farny św. Piotra i Pawła w Morągu*, Morąg 2000.

³ See: *Herder. Philosophy and Anthropology*, ed. A. Waldow, N. DeSouza, Oxford 2017. The publication comprises 13 papers penned by different authors discussing the work of J.G. Herder in philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, theory of culture and history.

literary scholar, poet, and a friend of the Poles.⁴ However, his theological views are still poorly understood.⁵

This article presents a sample of Herder's biblical exegesis and his theological commentary. The source text is an excerpt of the author's commentary on the Revelation to John, entitled: *Maran atha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn. Des Neuen Testaments Siegel*. 1779, ed. J.G. Müller, in: *Johann Gottfried von Herder, Sämtliche Werke. Zur Religion und Theologie. Zwölfter Theil*, Stuttgart und Tübingen 1829, p. 7–291 along with additional writings from 1773–1778.⁶ The academia commonly refers to the source text as *Johannes Offenbarung* (Johann's Revelation), since it deals with the last book of the New Testament. This paper focuses on Herder's commentary on the Messages to the Churches from Rev. 2–3 in the aim of presenting the distinctive character of his theological and biblical interpretation and with the hope of encouraging the reader to look at other theological works.

The paper is divided into two main sections. The first section gives a brief overview of the Herder's scientific and ecclesiastical career. The second section contains a description of his commentary on the Revelation of John 2–3. It is discussed a general description of *Johannes Offenbarung*, analysing the commentary on Rev. 2–3, firstly presents a brief outline of its content, and then enumerates the main characteristics of the author's interpretation of the Messages to the Churches.

1. HERDER'S SCIENTIFIC AND ECCLESIASTICAL CAREER

The career and intellectual growth of Johann Gottfried Herder were the upshot of his personal choices, explorations, reflections and his ability to hold onto his own beliefs.⁷ His formative years (1744–1762) spent in Mohrunen were a positive

⁴ See: T. Oracki, *Słownik biograficzny Warmii, Prus Książęcych i Ziemi Malborskiej od połowy XV do końca XVII wieku*, Vol. I, Olsztyn 1984, p. 95–98.

⁵ This remark refers mostly to the Polish academic community. Thus far, the leading role in research on Herder's theology has been played by German scholars, see i.a.: T. Willi, *Herders Beitrag zum Verstehen des Alten Testaments*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Hermeneutik 8, Tübingen 1971; C. Bultmann, *Die biblische Urgeschichte im Zeitalter der Aufklärung. Johann Gottfried Herders Interpretation der Genesis als Antwort auf die Religionskritik David Humes*, BHTh 110, Tübingen 1999; R. Smend, *Herder und die Bibel*, in: *Johann Gottfried Herder. Aspekte seines Lebenswerks*, ed. M. Keßler, V. Leppin, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 92, Berlin – New York 2005, p. 1–14; M. Keßler, *Herder's Theology*, in: *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder (Studies in German Literature, Linguistics and Culture)*, ed. H. Adler, W. Koepke, Rochester 2009, p. 247–275; M. Keßler, *Einleitung zu Herders Theologie*, in: *Herder Handbuch*, Paderborn 2016, p. 319–326; M. Keßler, *Muster theologischer Herder-Rezeption*, in: *ibidem*, p. 723–738.

⁶ The edition published by J.F. Hartknoch, in Riga 1779 and J.G. Müller in Stuttgart and Tübingen in 1829 is available online and as a PDF file in Google Books: https://books.google.pl/books?id=ljVKAACAAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=pl&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false (access: 27.07.2018). As recent Book edition Johann Gottfried Herder, *Marantha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn des Neuen Testaments Siegel*, Nabu Press, Charleston 2011.

⁷ See: M. Gerhards, *Herder, Johann Gottfried (1744–1802)*, in: <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/wibilex/das-bibellexikon/lexikon/sachwort/anzeigen/details/herder-johann-gottfried/ch/70689ff9bf7082e9e5f7536b3400abe8/> (access: 27 July 2017; paper from 2016).

influence on the personality of the young Herder.⁸ In Mohrungen, he gained the rudiments of his education and took his first jobs, helping out in the parish church as a copyist, while simultaneously using the parish library. Deprived of the support of his prematurely deceased father, in 1762 young Herder moved Königsberg (now Kaliningrad). He planned on studying medicine but in reality, he learnt theology, philosophy and physical geography. He was a student of the famous Königsberg professor, Immanuel Kant. Poverty-stricken due to the lack of any financial support, he made ends meet by giving classes in *Collegium Fridericanum*. University studies in the years 1762–1764 were a milestone in his career and substantial capital for the future.

Another important step in Herder's creative development was a stay in Riga (1764–1769) where he worked as a preacher and an educator. Herder's views were also informed by his travels, i.a. to France and Italy, direct contact with Denis Diderot and his long friendship with Johannes Wolfgang Goethe. In 1769, Herder went on a journey to France where he was appointed tutor and guardian of the crown prince in the Duchy of Holstein-Gottorp. He also underwent medical treatment in Strasburg.⁹

In terms of literary work, the stays in Bückenburg (1771–1776) and Weimar (1776–1802) proved the most fruitful. In 1773, Herder married Maria Caroline Flachslund of Darmstadt, with whom he had six children. Let us note that in this period, he held important offices as the court preacher and the superintendent.¹⁰

It is in Bückenburg, and especially in Weimar, that most of Herder's publications came into being.¹¹ The most important theological works penned by the author include: *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechtes* (1774/1776), *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament* (1775), *Briefe zweener Jünger Jesu* (1775), *Marantha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn, des Neuen Testaments Siegel* (1779), *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend* (1780), *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie* (1782/1783),¹² *Gott. Einige Gespräche* (1787). The book referred to as *Christliche Schriften* written in 1794–1798 contains writings of import for the history of exegesis, such as: *Von der Gabe der Sprachen am ersten christlichen Pfingstfest* (1794), *Von der Auferstehung als Glaube, Geschichte und Lehre* (1794), *Vom Erlöser der Menschen. Nach unseren ersten drei Evangelien* (1796), *Von Gottes Sohn, der Welt Heiland. Nach Johannes Evangelium. Nebst einer Regel der Zusammenstimmung unserer Evangelien aus ihrer Entstehung und Ordnung* (1797).

⁸ T. Oracki, *Słownik biograficzny*, p. 95 points to the influence of nature, atmosphere of the city, social contacts – also with Poles.

⁹ M. Gerhards, *Herder*, *ibidem*.

¹⁰ T. Oracki, *Słownik biograficzny*, p. 95–96.

¹¹ An exhaustive list of publications and subsequent editions of the complete works comprises, depending on the editing style, from 2 to 60 volumes. Notable main editions of complete works include: *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, 33 Bde., ed. B. Suphan, Berlin 1877–1913; *Johann Gottfried Herder. Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. G. Arnold et al., Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker, Frankfurt am Main 1985–2000;

¹² This two-volume work is discussed by i.a. M. Karczewski, *Język raj? Walory starożytnego języka hebrajskiego w świetle "Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie" (1782/1783) Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera*, *SE X* (2009), p. 123–134.

The specificity of theological work of Herder is related to his life's mission and rich creative personality. Herder was an eminent philosopher, poet but also an evangelical pastor. His theological interpretation often has practical, explanatory purpose. She was a model¹³ for other Protestant theologians.

2. HERDER AS A BIBLE COMMENTATOR

The texts usually regarded as the model sources on Herder's exegesis include the abovementioned commentary on the biblical story of creation from Genesis 1:1–2:3 – *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechtes*¹⁴ and his interpretation of the Song of Solomon from the volume: *Lieder der Liebe. Die ältesten und schönsten aus Morgenlande* (1778). This work emphasises the importance of love between a man and a woman as the main theme of the book, preceding other, allegorical meanings of the text. According to Herder, *the Song of Solomon* is an example of archaic Oriental love poetry which took the ancient Hebrew literary form.¹⁵ Herder proposes a new type of exegesis which underlines the importance of historical and cultural aspects, as well as the anthropological dimension. Familiarity with the historical and cultural realities leads to a better, deeper understanding of the religious truth expressed in the biblical text.

It is interesting to note Herder's participation in the academic discussion on the formation of the Gospels.¹⁶

As a man of the Enlightenment era, Herder detects in the Bible many cultural and religious aspects characteristic of ancient civilisations, but he does not content himself with this observation. In his mind, the element of human creation does not exclude the creative participation of God. Therefore, he regarded the Scripture as a cultural text but also, first and foremost, as the Word of God. It is not true that Herder's exegesis is deistic or agnostic. In-depth studies on Herder's commentaries to biblical texts reveal a clear willingness of the author to acquaint his readers with the true profundity of the Bible by explaining its content in a multifaceted manner. Herder's exegesis is founded on the following schema: get to know – understand – believe.¹⁷ In that respect, his work differs from later Protestant commentaries of the 19th century wherein, in the name of the enlightened knowledge and the desacralisation of the Bible, faith becomes an issue of no consequence whatsoever.

The commentary to the Revelation entitled *Marantha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn, des Neuen Testaments Siegel* (= *Johannes Offenbarung*) constitutes

¹³ M. Keßler, *Muster theologischer Herder-Rezeption*, p. 723–738.

¹⁴ See: Ch. Bultmann, *Creation at Beginning of History: Johann Gottfried Herder's Interpretation of Genesis I*, *Journal of Study of the Old Testament* 68 (1995) p. 23–32.

¹⁵ M. Gerhards, *Herder*, *ibidem*.

¹⁶ See: J. Frey, *Herder und die Evangelien*, in: *Johann Gottfried Herder. Aspekte seines Lebenswerkes*, p. 52–54; J. Frey, J. Schröter, *Jesus in apokryphen Evangelienüberlieferungen*, in: *Jesusforschung in vier Jahrhunderten. Texte von Anfängen historischer Kritik bis zur "dritten Frage" nach dem historischen Jesus*, ed. W. Zager, Berlin – Boston 2014, p. 702.

¹⁷ See: M. Mauer, *Johann Gottfried Herder. Leben und Werk*, Köln 2014, p. 9.

a substantial portion of the theological reflection dealing with eschatology. In the eschatological dimension, Herder notes that Christianity was originally influenced by the neo-Platonic and ancient Oriental currents in philosophy and religion.¹⁸ However, for the author, this observation is only a starting point for further theological analyses based on the theory that assumes the complementary character of biblical texts, particularly those of the New Testament.

3. *JOHANNES OFFENBARUNG* COMMENTARY BY HERDER 4.
MESSAGES TO THE CHURCHES (REV. 2–3)
IN *JOHANNES OFFENBARUNG*

According to the records from 1806 left by J.G. Müller, the commentary to the Revelation was completed in stages.¹⁹ The first versions were drawn up in years 1773–1775. In 1778, the text was being prepared for print. J.G. Herder wrote the manuscript in Bückenburg, in the residence of Count Schaumburg-Lippe, where he worked as a consistorial councillor. When the first edition was published, he held the office of general superintendent and chief preacher at the court in Weimar, a position that he obtained thanks to the intermediation of J.W. Goethe.²⁰

The *Johannes Offenbarung* commentary (hereinafter abbreviated as: *JO*) is a major example of Herder's reflection around the theological and biblical themes. Its structure is clear, though diversified in terms of length of its subsequent parts.

The commentary begins with a preface²¹ which emphasises the unique character of the Revelation. Readers of the book shall free their minds from the search of any occult system of meanings, from questions on the connection with the demolition of Jerusalem, for they should immerse themselves like children in the world of symbols presented in the Revelation, revelling in their beauty. This is because the imagery of the book refers to history, to the Old Testament, but also to 'the soul of John'.²² They are only frameworks open to individual interpretation. The introduction consists of two parts. The first part probably dates from March 1775 and the other shorter part from February 1778. The other part includes a dedication to his deceased closed ones.

Subsequent sections of the commentary are similar in structure, containing texts in German translated by Herder from Greek, complete with their explanation.²³

The first section consists in translations and comments to Rev. 1–3.²⁴ Translations and comments to Rev. 1:1–4; 9–11; 12–20 are regarded as a general methodological introduction to the interpretation of the whole book, as emphasised by the fact that the numbering starts only from the Messages to the Churches. The first part

¹⁸ See: G. Arnold, *Von letzten Dingen – eschatologische Elemente in Herders Werk und ihre Quelle*, in: *Johann Gottfried Herder. Aspekte seines Lebenswerkes*, p. 407–408.

¹⁹ See: *JO*, publisher's preface, p. 7.

²⁰ M. Gerhards, *Herder*, *ibidem*.

²¹ *JO*, p. 9–10.

²² *JO*, p. 10.

²³ The parts are marked with consecutive Roman numerals.

²⁴ *JO*, p. 15–44.

is concluded in a broad recapitulation spanning over several pages²⁵ which systematises and completes Herder's explanations. The second part²⁶ consists in the commentary on Rev. 4:1–11; 5:1–14; 6:1–8; 6:9–11; 6:12–17; 7:1–8; 7:9–17. The third part²⁷ opens with the commentary on Rev. 8:1–15. Furthermore, it includes explanations of Rev. 9:1–11; 9:12–19; 10:1–7; 10:8–11; 11:1–2, and 11:3–14. The fourth part²⁸ of the commentary refers to Rev. 11:15–19; 12:1–18; 13:1–10; 13:11–18, and 14:1–5. The fifth part²⁹ discusses Rev. 14:6–13; 14:14–20; 15–16, and chapters 17–18. The sixth part³⁰ is a commentary on Rev. 19–20. The seventh part³¹ opens with a commentary on the vision of a new heaven and a new earth from Rev. 21. Then the author proceeds to explore Rev. 22.

A large portion of the commentary consists in a general reflection³² on the hermeneutics of the Revelation. Herder expounds the meaning of the number seven in the literary structure of the entire Revelation.³³ Furthermore, he lists elements indicative of the unity of the book,³⁴ explains the timelessness of its message³⁵ and the reasons why it is so depreciated.³⁶ Herder then discusses the authorship of the Revelation.³⁷ He questions whether the book was penned by John, a notion dating back to the archaic Christianity. Based on other patristic testimonies, Herder believes John the Apostle to be the natural author of the book. He explains in what way the Revelation prophesies the fate of Jerusalem and all of Christianity.³⁸ Additionally, he discusses the question of deliberately addressing the revelation presented in the book to early church communities.³⁹ He elucidates why the message of the Revelation is the seal of Christianity,⁴⁰ while pointing out the Christocentric character of the book. Besides, Herder raises the issue of the canonicity of the Revelation.⁴¹ He considers the pre-Greek stage of the book's creation, the possible influence of the Hebrew language, original writings of the prophets and the development in John's writing style. Furthermore, he discusses in detail the language of the Apocalypse,⁴² in terms of both grammar and symbolism. Finally, he reveals the connections between the

²⁵ *JO*, p. 41–44.

²⁶ *JO*, p. 44–69.

²⁷ *JO*, p. 69–95.

²⁸ *JO*, p. 96–122.

²⁹ *JO*, p. 123–150.

³⁰ *JO*, p. 150–168.

³¹ *JO*, p. 169–181.

³² *JO*, p. 181–260.

³³ *JO*, p. 187–189.

³⁴ *JO*, p. 189–194.

³⁵ *JO*, p. 194–201.

³⁶ *JO*, p. 201–205.

³⁷ *JO*, p. 205–212.

³⁸ *JO*, p. 212–218.

³⁹ *JO*, p. 218–231.

⁴⁰ *JO*, p. 231–240.

⁴¹ *JO*, p. 240–242.

⁴² *JO*, p. 242–245.

Revelation and the Gospel of Jesus Christ,⁴³ the Roman, Greek, and Judaic worlds.⁴⁴ In particular, he closely examines how the symbolism of the Revelation relies on Hebrew literature.

Herder concludes his commentary on the Revelation in the words of Saint Jerome:⁴⁵ “Apocalypsis Joannis tot habet sacramenta quot verba. Parum dixi pro merito voluminis: laus omnis inferior est”.⁴⁶

The publisher completed the commentary with other Herder’s statements on the Revelation, found in his various writings such as: letters on the study of theology (1780),⁴⁷ a manuscript with commentary on Rev. 6:1–8 (1774),⁴⁸ manuscripts with commentaries on selected excerpts of the Revelation (1778),⁴⁹ manuscripts on Rev. 19 (1774 and 1778),⁵⁰ manuscript of the commentary on Rev. 21 (1774),⁵¹ and conclusions to the book (1774).⁵² In total, prof. G.H. Müller added ten shorter or longer statements by Herder which, for different reasons, did not appear in *Johannes Offenbarung*.

While explaining the Revelation, Herder very frequently refers to the Old and New Testament Scriptures, quoting in full those he considers particularly important. Furthermore, he evokes non-Christian texts, especially penned by Titus Flavius Josephus. Herder’s writing style is full of vibrancy. The author often asks questions and engages in a discussion with the reader, especially in the last, supplemental part of the commentary which constitutes almost a quarter of the entire text. Opinion that Herder with Abautzit and Eichhorn are representatives of German Preterism is only partially true.⁵³ In the interpretation of Rev. by Herder retains a far-reaching originality.

4.1. Content of the Messages

Commentary on the Messages to the Churches is included in the first part of the source text.⁵⁴ The messages are discussed in order, in seven numbered points. Every point contains a German translation of the Message and an explanation. Furthermore, much information on the Messages are found in the conclusions to the first part and scattered throughout the text. The Commentary on Rev. 2–3 investigates the

⁴³ *JO*, p. 245–247,

⁴⁴ *JO*, p. 247–260.

⁴⁵ *JO*, p. 260.

⁴⁶ Translation: “The Revelation of John has as many mysteries as it has words. On the merit of the book, I haven’t said but this: no praise is too high”.

⁴⁷ *JO*, p. 261–264.

⁴⁸ *JO*, p. 264–265.

⁴⁹ *JO*, p. 265–285.

⁵⁰ *JO*, p. 285–287.

⁵¹ *JO*, p. 285–289.

⁵² *JO*, p. 290–291.

⁵³ See T. Ice, *What is Preterism?*, in: *The End Times Controversy*, ed. T. LaHaye, T. Ice, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon 2003, p. 54–55.

⁵⁴ *JO*, p. 25–39.

Messages to the Churches separately. Some Messages are discussed in detail, others briefly or even very sparingly.

Message to the Church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–7). The main themes of the letter are innocence and love.⁵⁵ Herder writes: “Der ganze Brief ist wie aus dem Paradiese der Unschuld und der Liebe”.⁵⁶ The first love is a reference to motherly love and the bond between the betrothed, to a time that has, regrettably, passed. Love indicates a “paradise of innocence”, the first experience of happiness. But paradise is also the goal, together with the ‘blessed tree’ that one should never look away from. Love is the key: “O Liebe, du bist langmüthig und freundlich, aber wie die Flamme, die das Herz reinigt”.⁵⁷ As for the historical circumstances mentioned in the message, Herder believes in their veracity. False apostles showed up in many communities and the Nicolaitans are identified with Bileamites. The tree of life is a symbol in development and it refers to the promises at the end of the book.⁵⁸

Message to the Church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8–11). Herder emphasizes that the symbolism of this letter is simple: “Die Symbole des Briefes sind offenbar übereinstimmend”.⁵⁹ The angel of the Church is identified with the bishop, whose life is in danger.⁶⁰ Hence the promise: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.⁶¹ According to the author, perilous circumstances should be understood literally (“völlig historisch”).⁶² Ten days in prison must be the time of persecutions; the Jews are the Jews unworthy of the name; the synagogue is a synagogue⁶³ that Satan works through, causing the persecutions. Yet, faith will be rewarded with “eine Krone höheren Lebens” – “a crown of a better life”.⁶⁴

Message to the Church in Pergamum (Rev. 2:12–17). Herder emphasises: “Dieser Brief zeigt offenbar, dass die Symbole in der Gestalt Jesu und in der Stimme des Geistes sich auf den Inhalt der Briefe beziehen”.⁶⁵ The story of Bileamites echoes the account on Balaam from Num. 22–25. The angel with a two-edged sword stands in the way of Balaam and, in a similar vein, Christ turns against the Nicolaites. The people are identified with Bileamites who would drive Christians away from faith, be deceivers, worship idols and commit fornication. Israelites faithful to God re-

⁵⁵ *JO*, p. 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*. Translation: “The whole Letter is about innocence and love”.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*. Original spelling preserved. Translation: “Oh Love, you are patient and friendly, but like the flame which purifies the heart”.

⁵⁸ *JO*, p. 27.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*. Translation: “The symbols of the letter are apparently in agreement”.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *JO*, p. 28. Translator’s note: all biblical verses are quoted from the King James Bible.

⁶² *Ibidem*. Translation: „completely historical”.

⁶³ *Ibidem*. Sometimes Herder substitutes the term with the word “school”. Here: “Satans Schule” – „school of Satan”. See *JO*, p. 35.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ *JO*, p. 29. Translation: “This letter indicates clearly that the symbols discernible both in the appearance of Jesus and in the voice of the Holy Spirit are related to the content of the messages”.

ceive white dew, manna, and a new name which no man knows. The theme of a mysterious name continues until the end of the Revelation.

Message to the Church in Thyatira (Rev. 2:18–29). Like the preceding message referred to the story of Balaam, this one evokes Ahab and Jezebel from the Old Testament (2 Kings 9:32–33:37). The state of the eyes and feet of Christ portends the inevitable punishment for symbolic Jezebel active in Thyatira.⁶⁶ In addition, the author observes the relationships between motifs of the preceding letters: the synagogue of Satan, the death of Antipas where Satan's seat is – and the depths of Satan from the Message to the Church in Thyatira. For Herder, this term signifies false gnostic mysteries and wisdom received (“Tiefen mystischer Geheimnisse und Weisheit”)⁶⁷ as the depths of God while, in reality, they come from Satan. The deceivers regarded themselves as the creators of the world and the demiurges ruling it, sons of God bestowed with spiritual gifts⁶⁸ but the true Son of God will reveal the real truth about them.

Message to the Church in Sardis (Rev. 3:1–6). The Church in Sardis is dormant and dying, clothed in a nightgown and the garments of death, surrounded by the thickening stench of decay.⁶⁹ This is why He who has the seven spirits of life, who died and came alive, speaks to the Church. He wants to rouse and to revive. Thus, it is important to stay watchful for only the prepared will partake in the feast of the Beloved. According to the author,⁷⁰ the message is strictly related to the words of Christ spoken on earth.

Message to the Church in Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7–13). Symbols related to Christ apparent in the Message to Philadelphia echo the final visions of the Revelation,⁷¹ especially the vision of the city of God, the new Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 29:23; 40:25; Hos. 11:9). The symbol of the pillar refers to the veracity of Christ's words whereas the key of the David's place emphasises the omnipotence of the custodian of the House of God. On earth, he was only a poor teacher, custodian of a small flock. However, he was elevated thanks to his faithfulness. His symbols are the sign of His omnipotence (cf. Rev. 5:7–15). They evoke verses from Isa. 22:17–25 which originally refer to a royal servant. The universal message of the letter echoes also the words of the Gospel: “thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (cf. Mt. 25:14–30).⁷²

Message to the Church in Laodicea (Rev. 3:14–22). The tone of the letter is harsh.⁷³ Herder accents: „Der letzte Brief ist beinahe der schärfste”.⁷⁴ The speaker

⁶⁶ *JO*, p. 31.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 32. Translation: “Depths of mystic secrets and wisdom”

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*. “Söhne Gottes und Neonenreiche” – “Sons of God and rich in Neons”. Herder quotes short Greek texts from gnostic writings, but without giving any sources.

⁶⁹ *JO*, p. 34.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 37.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*. Translation: “The last letter is almost the sharpest”.

calls himself “the Amen, the faithful and true witness” (cf. John 3:11; 9:39–41; 13:8; 14:6)⁷⁵ and fiercely rebukes for that which false friends ignore. Christ is a true friend, he admonishes but also stands at the door and knocks to sup together, with trust. He also wants to sit at his Father’s throne with his friends, which foreshadows the fulfilment of the promise given in the Gospel – that people will participate in the glory which He received from the Father (John 17:22).

*Conclusions of commentary to Rev. 2–3.*⁷⁶ Herder emphasises that in his explanations, he focused on the images that, in his opinion, required some commentary; images that are exceptional and provide information on the situation of the communities. The text of Rev. 2–3 is replete with the Spirit of Christ, the same that pervades the Gospel of John.⁷⁷ Almost every word is related to the testimonies of the Evangelist, including the words of encouragement to preserve the Word, to endure, to love, and remain faithful until death. The same applies to symbols of the manna: bread from heaven, wedding and the second coming of Jesus. Everything is sealed with the seal of His heart. He is a gentle friend who stands at the door and, once more, wants to visit.

The true spirit of Christianity pervades the Messages.⁷⁸ The author emphasises that there is no Christianity without the calls and teachings of Christ. Christianity needs to preserve its purity, freedom from the influence of paganism and other religions. It is not animated by groundless stories and fairy tales but by the Spirit of Christ. It places trust the Word of God. High Priest in Heaven does not shut Himself away in any worldly temple. He is present among the Christian communities which He serves.⁷⁹ With this insight, Christian martyrs die in peace. Any Christian studying the messages must be devout and fully committed to serving his own community and Christianity of his time.

According to Herder, the seven messages are the seven gates which lead to the book.⁸⁰ They lay the groundwork for the entire Revelation. In the messages, Christ is omnipresent, bringing joy or threats, like He does in the entire book. Voices of the Spirit are the sound of heaven in the hearts of those who fight under pressure and in danger. However, thanks to the Spirit, the recipient of the message approaches the goal. Symbols mentioned in the introduction to the book are explained later on, elucidated by Christ Himself, and directed by the Spirit to those that have an ear – and listen.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ *JO*, p. 39–43.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 40.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 41.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 42.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, p. 43.

⁸¹ Ibidem.

4.2. Main characteristics of the interpretation

Considering that Johann Gottfried Herder is not only a theologian, but also a philosopher and a poet, capturing the fundamental characteristics of the interpretation of *Offenbarung Johannes* poses a challenge. However, in the commentary to the Revelation, qualities related to the original vocation of the author seem to take precedence.

Synchrony of the text. Herder uses the same method to comment on the entire book, including Rev. 2–3. He evokes many excerpts from the Gospel, particularly the Gospel of John. Allusions to the Old Testament are thoroughly explained in their original contexts (Balaam, Jezebel, etc.). Since Herder perceives Rev. 2–3 as an introduction to Rev. 4–22 (the seven gates), references to other texts of the Revelation are relatively scarce. However, the author clearly and comprehensibly brings together symbols and theological content from a few messages simultaneously. Thus, his approach to biblical scriptures is marked with synchrony. The text is treated as a single source of God's Word, whether it is derived from the Old or the New Testament.⁸²

Absence of the specifics. Herder avoids pointing to any specific, contemporary cases when the texts of the Revelation came to pass. Even in the verses from Rev. 2–3 containing the criticism of false apostles, gnostic sects, and errors, he never mentions any specific rivalling Christian creed. Herder believes the term “synagogue of Satan” to evoke historical problems of specific communities from the Revelation but he does not elaborate on the problem. There are no discernible anti-Semitic overtones. According to the author, the message of the Revelation is timeless and valid in any era.

A distinctive style. In the commentary to Rev. 2–3, Herder maintains a preacher's style interspersed with poetic embellishments.⁸³ Although the commentary has a certain structure, it is often fragmentary, focused on aspects which caught the author's interest. Herder repeatedly emphasises that providing a literal commentary on the entire content of Rev. 2–3 is not his intent. He attaches great importance to questions, either rhetorical or addressed to a potential reader. Even though the questions are few and far between, they accentuate the truths which Herder considers particularly significant. The author refers to Jesus with utmost reverence. Simultaneously, he presents the images of Jesus as a preacher, showing His qualities important in the

⁸² Despite the emerging historical-critical method and the growing tendency to approach the Bible rationally, which will finally result in its actual desecralisation, Herder holds to his beliefs on exegesis, as highlighted by M. Gerhards: ‘Herder mahnt jedenfalls an, dass es in der Bibelauslegung nicht darauf ankomme, was jeder Splitter und Nagel einzeln an seinem Ort bedeutet habe, sondern was er im gesamten Gebäude, darin ihn die Vorsehung, über Zeiten und Völker hinaus, gesetzt hat, uns jetzt bedeute. Dabei setzt er voraus, daß nur die Summe dessen, was uns die Bibel lehrt, Theologie und in seiner Anwendung praktische Theologie ist’. Ibidem.

⁸³ Herder's exegesis is related to his poetic talent, see: D. Weidner, *Lektüren im Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*, in: *Urpoesie und Morgenland. Johann Gottfried Herders "Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie"*, ed. D. Weidner, Berlin 2008, p. 9; S. Vietta, *Poeto-Theologie Herders*, in: *Herausforderung Herder / Herder as Challenge. Ausgewählte Beiträge zur Konferenz der Internationalen Herder-Gesellschaft Madison 2006*, ed. S. Groß, Heidelberg 2010, p. 75–86.

pastoral and spiritual perspective. The reader is invited to draw his own conclusions from the sermon. The real aim of the commentary is to animate faith and encourage to zealous service within the Church.

Theological commentary. An astounding facility in navigating across the biblical text and a vivid, evangelistic style ideally befit the content of the commentary. Despite the references made to historical realities of the first Christians, the nature of Herder's commentary is unmistakably theological and biblical.⁸⁴ The author explains the text paying special attention to three theological dimensions of his message: Christological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological. Since according to Rev. 2–3, the messages come from the Resurrected Christ, the fundamental theological content of the commentary involves a Christological interpretation. Pneumatology constitutes another important element of the commentary. The author pays close attention to the role played in Rev. 2–3 by the Holy Spirit and, many a time, emphasises his relation to Christ.

The last quality characteristic of Herder's theology and apparent in the commentary is the reference to the Christian community. The ecclesial dimension is obvious as Rev. 2–3 comprises messages to Churches. Naturally, warnings and promises addressed to the Churches refer also to other Christian communities. Christ's words are directed not only to a community, but also to an individual. Herder accentuates this aspect when, as a preacher, he addresses a particular person, the reader of his work, instead of an anonymous community.⁸⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Presentation of a sample of theological work by Johann Gottfried Herder reveals that he was not only a philosopher of culture and language or a poet. Herder was more than an eminent figure of the Enlightenment, as he is usually described by the academic community. Certainly, we could speculate whether he fell in the footsteps of some rationalists of the Enlightenment who rejected basic Christian truths. Being politically correct we could leave unsaid what was his primary identity. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, Herder was first and foremost an intelligent Christian, eminent figure of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, unfaltering preacher and theologian. His relationship with God and the community of the faithful occupied a central place in his personal life. The scope of any academic discussion on his work which fails to acknowledge those facts is truncated and wanting.

⁸⁴ See: J. Loop, "Von dem Geschmack der morgenländischen Dichtkunst" *Orientalistik und Biblexegese bei Huet, Michaelis und Herder*, in: *Urpoesie und Morgenland*, p. 155–184.

⁸⁵ For more information on the reception of Herder's views, see: M. Keßler, *Muster theologischer Herder-Rezeption*, p. 723–738.

LISTY DO SIEDMIU KOŚCIOŁÓW W „JOHANNES OFFENBARUNG” JOHANNA GOTTFRIEDA HERDERA

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł *Messages to the Seven Churches in Johannes Offenbarung* by Johann Gottfried Herder nawiązuje do publikacji w języku polskim *Siedem bram. Komentarz do Apokalipsy 2–3 według „Johannes Offenbarung” Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera*, w: *Veritatem revelare. Księga Pamiątkowa dedykowana ks. S. Ewertowskiemu w 40-lecie święceń kapłańskich i 65-lecie urodzin*, red. M. Karczewski, S. Mikołajczak, J. Ruciński, Wydział Teologii UWM, Olsztyn 2017, s. 107–118. Jednak w artykule angielskojęzycznym poszerzono znacznie ilość cytatów z oryginalnego źródła, uzupełniono bibliografię naukową, dopracowano wnioski teologiczne, poszerzono zasadniczą treść publikacji. Artykuł stanowi przyczynek do dalszych badań nad hermeneutyką biblijną Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera. W dyskusji naukowej na ten temat nie brakuje bowiem uproszczeń i opinii nie do końca uprawnionych. Artykuł zawiera wstęp, dwie części główne oraz zakończenie. Części główne są dedykowane odpowiednio: (1) krótkiej charakterystyce rozwoju naukowego oraz kariery kościelnej J.G. Herdera; omówieniu jego twórczości teologicznej; charakterystyce twórczości J.G. Herdera jako biblisty oraz (2) analizie *Listów do Kościołów* zawartych w jego komentarzu do Apokalipsy. Źródło podstawowe stanowi tekst *Maran atha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn. Des Neuen Testaments Siegel. 1779* wydany pierwotnie w Rydze oraz w edycji J.G. Müllera w Stuttgarcie i Tybindze w serii *Johann Gottfried von Herder's Sämtliche Werke. Zur Religion und Theologie. Zwölfter Theil* w roku 1829, s. 8–291 wraz z dodatkowymi tekstami dotyczącymi Apokalipsy św. Jana z lat 1773–1778. Komentarz biblijny do Ap 2–3, wraz z jego niezwykłym stylem naukowym i kaznodziejskim zarazem stanowi cenne źródło informacji o sposobach interpretacji tekstu biblijnego stosowanych przez J.G. Herdera. Jednocześnie pozwala zapoznać się bliżej oryginalną teologią Herdera, która wypływając ze Słowa Boga zdaje się bazować na trzech filarach: chrystologii, pneumatologii oraz eklezjologii. Przesłanie teologiczne J.G. Herdera zawarte w omawianej części komentarza do Apokalipsy św. Jana posiada w wielu punktach walor ponad konfesyjny i ponadczasowy.

MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES IN “JOHANNES OFFENBARUNG” BY JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER

SUMMARY

The Article *Messages to the Seven Churches in “Johannes Offenbarung”* by Johann Gottfried Herder refers to the publication in Polish *Siedem bram. Komentarz do Apokalipsy 2–3 według “Johannes Offenbarung” Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera*, in: *Veritatem revelare. Księga Pamiątkowa dedykowana ks. dr. hab. S. Ewertowskiemu, prof. UWM. W 40-lecie święceń kapłańskich i 65-lecie urodzin*, ed. M. Karczewski, S. Mikołajczak, J. Ruciński, Faculty of Theology University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn 2017, p. 107–118. However in the English-language article significantly expanded the number of quotes from the original source, the scientific bibliography has been supplemented, the theological conclusion were refined, the content of the publication has been extended. The article is a contribution too further research on the biblical hermeneutic of Johann Gottfried Herder. Scientific discus-

sion on this subject is not free from simplifications and opinions not entirely legitimate. The article contains an introduction, two main parts and conclusion. The main parts contain: 1) a short description of the scientific and ecclesiastical career of J.G. Herder; discussion of his theological works; characteristics of J.G. Herder as a biblist and 2) analysis of the Messages to the Seven Churches contained in his commentary on the Revelation. The basic source is *Maran atha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn. Des Neuen Testaments Siegel. 1779* issued originally in Riga and in the edition of J.G. Müller in Stuttgart and Tübingen in the Johann Gottfried von Herder's *Sämtliche Werke. Zur Religion und Theologie. Zwölfter Theilseries*, 1829, pp. 8–291 along with additional texts on the Revelation of St. John from 1773–1778. A biblical commentary to Rev. 2–3, along with its unusual scientific style and preaching, is a valuable source of knowledge about Herder's biblical interpretation. This allows you to get acquainted with Herder's original theology, which, flowing from the Word of God, is based on three pillars: Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. Theological message of J.G. Herder contained in the discussed part of the commentary on the Revelation has, over many points, the value above the confessional and timeless.

DIE SENDSCHREIBEN AN DIE SIEBEN GEMEINDEN IN „JOHANNES OFFENBARUNG“ VON JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel *Messages to the Seven Churches in „Johannes Offenbarung“* by Johann Gottfried Herder wird der Frage nach der biblischen Hermeneutik von Johann Gottfried von Herder gewidmet. Die Hauptquelle, die analysiert wird ist sein Kommentar zur Offenbarung des Johannes *Maran atha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn. Des Neuen Testaments Siegel. 1779* mit anderen kürzeren Schriften, die zwischen 1775 und 1778 entstanden sind. Das Buch *Maran atha* wird in der wissenschaftlichen Diskussion als *Johannes Offenbarung* bezeichnet. Nach der kurzen Charakteristik der wichtigsten Etappen von Leben und Karriere von J.G. Herder, die seine literarische Kreativität beeinflusst haben wird synthetisch theologische und exegetische Herder's Werke präsentiert. Der letzte Punkt ist vor allem der Lektüre vom Kommentar zu Apk 2–3 gewidmet. Erst wird es kurz die gesamte *Johannes Offenbarung* analysiert. Der Kommentar zu den Schriften zu Sieben Kirchen (Apk 2–3) gehört zum ersten Teil des Buches. Die Schriften zu den Kirchen werden auf Deutsch übersetzt und dann erklärt. Die Herder's Exegese und der theologische Kommentar scheinen die besonderen Eigenschaften zu behalten. Es sind u.a.: eine Synchronie des biblischen Textes; keine Konkretisierung; einzigartige Stil und umfangreiche Theologie. Bei der Erklärung der apokalyptischen Symbole Herder beginnt oft mit der Anknüpfung zu der religiösen und kulturellen Umwelt des frühen Christentums, dann aber sucht die Deutung im Kontext von Bibel. Die theologische Verständigung des Textes Apk 2–3 wird vor allem christologisch, pneumatologisch und ekklesiologisch betrachtet.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder (Studies in German Literature, Linguistics and Culture)*, ed. H. Adler, W. Koepke, Rochester 2009.
- Arnold G., *Von letzten Dingen – eschatologische Elemente in Herders Werk und ihre Quelle*, in: *Johann Gottfried Herder. Aspekte seines Lebenswerks*, ed. M. Keßler, V. Leppin, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 92, Berlin – New York 2005, p. 407–408.
- Bultmann C., *Die biblische Urgeschichte im Zeitalter der Aufklärung. Johann Gottfried Herders Interpretation der Genesis als Antwort auf die Religionskritik David Humes*, BHTH 110, Tübingen 1999.
- Bultmann Ch., *Creation at Beginning of History: Johann Gottfried Herder's Interpretation of Genesis 1*, *Journal of Study of the Old Testament* 68 (1995) p. 23–32.
- Frey J., *Herder und die Evangelien*, in: *Johann Gottfried Herder. Aspekte seines Lebenswerks*, ed. M. Keßler, V. Leppin, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 92, Berlin – New York 2005, p. 52–54.
- Frey J., Schröter J., *Jesus in apokryphen Evangelienüberlieferungen*, in: *Jesusforschung in vier Jahrhunderten. Texte von Anfängen historischer Kritik bis zur „dritten Frage“ nach dem historischen Jesus*, ed. W. Zager, Berlin – Boston 2014, s. 699–708.
- Gerhards M., *Herder, Johann Gottfried (1744–1802)*, in: https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/wibilex/das_bibellexikon/lexikon/sachwort/anzeigen/details/herder-johann-gottfried/ch/70689ff9bf7082e9e5f7536b3400abe8/ (access: 27 July 2017).
- Herausforderung Herder / Herder as Challenge. Ausgewählte Beiträge zur Konferenz der Internationalen Herder-Gesellschaft Madison 2006*, ed. S. Groß, Heidelberg 2010.
- Herder Handbuch*, ed. S. Greif, M. Hein, H. Clairmont, Paderborn 2016.
- Herder. Philosophy and Antropology*, ed. A. Waldow, N. DeSouza, Oxford 2017.
- Herders Sämtliche Werke*, 33 Bde., ed. B. Suphan, Berlin 1877–1913.
- Ice T., *What is Preterism?*, in: *The End Times Controversy*, ed. T. LaHaye, T. Ice, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon 2003, p. 37–65.
- Johann Gottfried Herder. Aspekte seines Lebenswerks*, ed. M. Keßler, V. Leppin, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 92, Berlin – New York 2005.
- Johann Gottfried Herder. Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. G. Arnold et al., Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker, Frankfurt am Main 1985–2000.
- Karczewski M., *Język raju? Walory starożytnego języka hebrajskiego w świetle „Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie” (1782/1783) Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera*, *Studia Elbląskie X* (2009), p. 123–134.
- Karczewski M., *Siedem bram. Komentarz do Apokalipsy 2–3 według „Johannes Offenbarung” Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera*, in: *Veritatem revelare. Księga Pamiątkowa dedykowana ks. S. Ewertowskiemu w 40-lecie święceń kapłańskich i 65-lecie urodzin*, ed. M. Karczewski, S. Mikołajczak, J. Ruciński, Faculty of Theology UWM, Olsztyn 2017, p. 107–118.
- Keßler M., *Einleitung zu Herders Theologie*, in: *Herder Handbuch*, ed. S. Greif, M. Hein, H. Clairmont, Paderborn 2016, p. 319–326.
- Keßler M., *Herder's Theology*, in: *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder (Studies in German Literature, Linguistics and Culture)*, ed. H. Adler, W. Koepke, Rochester 2009, p. 247–275.
- Keßler M., *Muster theologischer Herder-Rezeption*, in: *Herder Handbuch*, ed. S. Greif, M. Hein, H. Clairmont, Paderborn 2016, p. 723–738.
- Loop J., *„Von dem Geschmack der morgenländischen Dichtkunst” Orientalistik und Bibelexegese bei Huet, Michaelis und Herder*, in: *Urpoesie und Morgenland. Johann Gottfried Herders „Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie”*, ed. D. Weidner, Berlin 2008, p. 155–184.

- Maran atha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn. Des Neuen Testaments Siegel*, ed. J.F. Hartknoch, Riga 1779.
- Maran atha. Das Buch von der Zukunft des Herrn. Des Neuen Testaments Siegel*. 1779, ed. J.G. Müller, w: *Johann Gottfried von Herder, Sämtliche Werke. Zur Religion und Theologie. Zwölfter Theil*, Stuttgart und Tübingen 1829, p. 7–291.
- Mauer M., *Johann Gottfried Herder. Leben und Werk*, Köln 2014.
- Oracki T., *Słownik biograficzny Warmii, Prus Książęcych i Ziemi Malborskiej od połowy XV do końca XVII wieku*, Vol. I, Olsztyn 1984, p. 95–98.
- Smend R., *Herder und die Bibel*, in: *Johann Gottfried Herder. Aspekte seines Lebenswerks*, ed. M. Keßler, V. Leppin, *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 92, Berlin – New York 2005, p. 1–14.
- Szymański W., Rzymaska A., *Kościół farny św. Piotra i Pawła w Morągu*, Morąg 2000.
- Weidner D., *Lektüren im Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*, in: *Urpoesie und Morgenland. Johann Gottfried Herders „Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie“*, ed. D. Weidner, Berlin 2008, p. 9–21.
- Urpoesie und Morgenland. Johann Gottfried Herders „Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie“*, ed. D. Weidner, Berlin 2008.
- Willi T., *Herders Beitrag zum Verstehen des Alten Testaments*, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Hermeneutik* 8, Tübingen 1971.
- Vietta S., *Poeto-Theologie Herders*, in: *Herausforderung Herder / Herder as Challenge. Ausgewählte Beiträge zur Konferenz der Internationalen Herder-Gesellschaft Madison 2006*, ed. S. Groß, Heidelberg 2010, p. 75–86..