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# SIGVE K. TONSTAD

## TRANSPARENCY IN LEADERSHIP: THE DIVINE GOVERNANCE CHALLENGE FROM THE APOCALYPSE

**Keywords:** *transparent leadership, accountability, transparency*

Academic approaches to Revelation treat the opening word revelation (*apokalypsis*; Rev. 1:1) as an opportunity to discuss the literary genre of this remarkable piece of ancient literature. Quite a few interpreters are content to leave it at that. To my knowledge no one has attempted to explore this word as a declaration of ideology, and much less as a statement that this book is committed to a particular form of leadership. The following, therefore, is a consideration of the leadership implications of the word that gives the last book of the Bible its title. The working hypothesis is that the book of Revelation is committed to *transparent* leadership. This ideology is announced in the opening word. With such a reading, Revelation strikes a blow to religious, political, and other institutions that thrive on secrecy and concealment.

### Beyond the Question of Genre

Preoccupation with the genre of Revelation is legitimate, bolstered in part by force of habit and by the fact that the word *apokalypsis* has lent its name to the genre of apocalyptic literature. Awareness of genre, in turn, facilitates interpretation because it gives the reader a head start in terms of what to expect from the type of work he or she is reading.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, such “knowledge” is less helpful if the reader gets the question of genre wrong.

The risk of error on this point is considerable. While many features of Revelation support the notion that this is an apocalyptic book,<sup>2</sup> it is not *only*

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<sup>1</sup>E. D. Hirsch defines genre as “that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy.”

<sup>2</sup>John Collins and others give the following definition of the apocalyptic genre, a definition that is still widely accepted: “‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”

*that.* Assigning it to the apocalyptic genre overlooks characteristics that align the book closely with the genre of prophetic literature. John Wick Bowman is correct when he says that the use of the word *apokalypsis* in the opening verse of Revelation has had consequences that the author “neither intended nor foresaw.” As Morton Smith notes, we can be sure that this word was not a signifier of literary genre at the time of the writing of Revelation. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sees the opening verses of Revelation in a similar light, arguing that the author meant to write “*a revelatory prophetic letter.*”<sup>3</sup> Interpretations that build on generic similarities alone should therefore be treated with caution. In comparing Revelation to the non-canonical apocalypses, R. H. Charles insists that the superiority of John’s book “is not merely relative but absolute.” All of the above indicates that the genre of Revelation is elusive and that the word *apokalypsis* is not meant to cue the reader into the genre of literature he or she is reading.

Moving beyond the question of genre, it is likely that the author used the word *apokalypsis* because it fit his message. We are thus well advised to begin by considering the root meaning of this term.

Looking at the word itself, it is best approached through its verbal counterpart, *apo-kalypfo*. This compound word consists of the verb *kalypfo* and the preposition *apo*. Starting with *kalypfo*, the action envisioned is straightforward. This verb means to “remove something from view,” to *conceal, hide, or cover* the item in question. We might picture the action by imagining an item that is placed in a chest whereupon the lid is closed. The item has now been hidden from view. Transliterating the Greek word and giving it an English ending, the item has been *kalypted*.

If we wish to reverse the action, we can do it by placing the preposition *apo-* in front of the verb. *Apo-kalypfo* describes an *uncovering*, a removal of the lid in order to bring the hidden item into full view. The word itself pictures the opposite of concealment and is actually the reversal of concealment. In the context of Revelation, the notion of revealing what another party might wish to hide goes to the heart of the matter. When the concealed item is exposed in broad daylight, it has, in our makeshift Greek–English transliteration, been *apo-kalypted*.

It is not contrived to begin here, delineating the meaning of the word through this contrast and counterpart. The message of Revelation is not given in a vacuum. Anton Vögtle writes that God “is not the only one who is at work in this world—as the Apocalypse makes so abundantly clear.” Looking at the message of the book as a whole, we are justified in viewing the notion of *revelation* against the background of its opposite. We are, in fact, quite amiss if we do not keep this perspective in view. *Apokalypsis* confronts *kalypsis*, just as

<sup>3</sup>Emphasis added.

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uncovering stands against cover-up. In Revelation, the attempted concealment is exposed and reversed.

This scenario does not weaken or diminish the value of the ideology of *uncovering*, providing transparency, which is central to the word we are exploring. What we find, as announced in the very first word of the book, is the ideology of transparency and transparent leadership. *Transparency* lies within the semantic field of the notion of revelation (*apokalypsis*). Transmuting this into an ideology and principle of leadership offers transparency as a core value in leadership relationships in the book of Revelation.

## Exploring Transparency in Revelation

Revelation leaves no doubt as to who is the prime mover in the expanding circle of initiates that come into view in the opening verses. “The revelation [*apokalypsis*] of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw” (1:1–2).<sup>4</sup> The initiative begins with God. God gives His revelation to Jesus in a way that makes Jesus both the mediator and the content of what is revealed. Jesus, in turn, sends His angel to John, the primary human recipient of the revelation. John, for his part, is not meant to keep the disclosure to himself. He put the message into letter form, addressing it “to the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4). However, a wider audience was immediately assumed because the introductory greeting pronounces a blessing on “the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and . . . those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (1:3). Broadly speaking, the message is addressed “to whom it may concern.”

The verbal parameters in ever-widening circle are striking. At the center there is the *apokalypsis* itself, “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” This revelation is transported from the center to the world’s utmost periphery by a series of dynamic action verbs. It is given “to show”; it is “made known”; there is a person who testifies (John); there is writing; and there is a person who “reads aloud” (1:1–3). Whether as noun or as verbal action, the opening passage of Revelation resounds with openness, transparency, and publicity.

Transparency in leadership cannot happen unless there is access. In Revelation, the notion of access leads to God. In this book, John is given access not to an earthly hall of power but to the innermost chamber of the heavenly council. If we read this story as a text that brings to light a certain type of leadership, the scene is stunning, almost beyond comprehension. “After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!” (4:1). The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) appropriately adds an exclamation mark to its trans-

<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

lation, emphasizing not only the sense of surprise at the open door, but also its location. Open doors have been in short supply in the halls of power throughout human history. If ever an exclamation mark was warranted, this must be the place. And what is the open door but a signifier of access? What is the open door but proof of transparency? What is the open door but a signal that the heavenly authority grants what earthly authorities often deny, even authorities that profess commitment to openness? John is certainly justified in conveying a sense of amazement at the discovery that “in heaven a door stood open!”

More is to follow. The open door is not a publicity stunt that has no bearing on policy. As if aware that John is unsure how to relate to the open door, the vision goes on to tell him how to proceed. “And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this’” (4:1). This, particularly, is a place to take seriously Richard Bauckham’s contention that in Revelation “scarcely a word can have been chosen without deliberate reflection on its relationship to the work as an integrated, interconnected whole.” John recognizes that the voice in question is the voice he heard earlier, “speaking to me like a trumpet” (4:1; cf. 1:10). We are not amiss if we assume that the voice is still speaking “like a trumpet.” The voice is at once prodding and commanding; it proclaims access without the slightest reluctance; it speaks in the tenor of the trumpet blast as if to make sure that the reluctance that must be overcome is on the human side and not on the side of the heavenly authority.

Spurred on by the open door and the voice speaking “like a trumpet,” John, now in the Spirit, enters through the door (4:2). The open door leads into the very presence of God. Once more the New Revised Standard Version resorts to the exclamation mark: “there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!” (4:2).

John’s audience in the heavenly council has a substantive purpose. We cannot conclude otherwise if we allow ourselves to ponder the next item in the narrative. “Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and sealed with seven seals” (5:1).

Discretion and disclosure go hand in hand in this verse. The discretion, maintained consistently throughout Revelation, relates to John’s depiction of “the one seated on the throne” (4:2, 9; 5:1, 7, 13). Disclosure is highlighted by the sealed scroll “in the right hand of the one seated on the throne” (5:1). Revelation could have tried to overwhelm John with an appeal to the senses, a dose of shock and awe. It could prioritize a display of pomp and circumstance, an aesthetic experience never to be forgotten, as the means by which to keep human beings obedient and submissive.

But the core of Revelation’s disclosure relates to policy. As Adela Yarbro

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Collins writes perceptively, “the heavenly council is faced with a serious problem.” The problem relates to God’s way of dealing with a reality that seems long on disaster and short on hope. To this end, the sealed scroll must be unsealed. John has been invited into the heavenly council in order to witness the breaking of the seals. There, in his presence, one by one, the seals are broken by the Lamb that appears “in the middle of the throne” (5:6; 6:1–8:1). Breathtaking disclosures come to light. At last, when the seventh seal is broken, we read that “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (8:1).

Policy concerns are at the center of these disclosures. In leadership terms, God chooses the road of painstaking and principled openness. Secrecy is out, and transparency is in. What has been concealed, obfuscated, and misrepresented by the opponent in the cosmic conflict is revealed, explained, and made right in God’s revelation of his ways through Jesus. A more complete account of the theological implications of this policy may be pursued, but the leadership implications do not need the full account to be appreciated. “When the slaughtered Lamb is seen ‘in the midst of’ the divine throne in heaven (5:6; cf. 7:17), the meaning is that Christ’s sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world*,<sup>5</sup> says Richard Bauckham. Jesus, the only One who can break the seals “in heaven, or on earth, or under the earth” (5:2–5), has confirmed that the heavenly leadership rests on the foundation of transparency.

The modus operandi of God’s ways thus sets forth openness as a prized value. The first of Revelation’s revelatory cycles, the cycle of the seven seals, is replete with transparency. There is an open door to God, a trumpet call to step into God’s immediate presence, and a sealed scroll that will be opened before our eyes. We are brought face to face with leadership that is committed to openness. Trust in this leader rests on divine transparency and not on unquestioning submission. Revelation envisions faithful discipleship as much as any other book in the Bible (13:10; 14:4), but its notion of discipleship is predicated on understanding (13:18; 17:9).

The subsequent cycles of seven in Revelation do not retreat from this theme. In the trumpet sequence, it is precisely the policy of transparency that runs its course. As this cycle draws to a close, John’s accompanying angel explains that “when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets” (10:7). If we allow the Old Testament to illuminate this statement,<sup>6</sup> the transparency that underlies the disclosure will shine even more brightly. God did speak to “his servants the prophets,” as this allusion to the prophet Amos indicates. God did speak again and again in human history until the full account was out (Heb. 1:1) because

<sup>5</sup>Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup>Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, xi, says that “Revelation’s use of the Old Testament Scriptures is an essential key to its understanding. . . . Reference to and interpretation of these texts is an extremely important part of the meaning of the text of the Apocalypse. It is a book designed to be read in constant intertextual relationship with the Old Testament.”

transparency is not an accidental feature of what comes to light in Revelation. When we read Amos in his own context, we realize that transparency must be a core element in the divine ideology. God says, “Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

When the last of the cycles of seven, the bowl sequence, rolls across the screen, transparency, as principle and policy, completes its course. In this scene (Rev. 15:2–4), transparency is written on the structure of the scene. The final edifice of the redeemed is represented as a sea of glass, as if to say that where God leads and reigns, obfuscation and concealment are banished.

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: “Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! Lord, who will not fear and glorify your Name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed.” (Rev. 15:2–4)

Here, too, the emphasis is on bringing things into the light, driving back the forces of misrepresentation and concealment. The proclamation that God’s “judgments have been revealed” means that God’s way of governing is incontrovertibly manifest. Those who sing this song, a song that recapitulates God’s redemptive intent throughout human history, sing it with understanding. God’s way meets with admiration. Indeed, we should be prepared for the possibility that those who praise God in this song praise Him not only because “God’s judgments” have met their comparatively modest standards, but also even more because those judgments have far exceeded their standard and transformed their view of how to make right what has gone wrong.

Where there is transparency, there is also accountability. These are reciprocal and mutually dependent values. Accountability is impossible in the absence of transparency because the latter is the precondition for the former. On the other hand, transparency is the stance of one who has nothing to hide and who, for that reason, invites and solicits accountability. Two texts in Revelation are especially noteworthy as to how and why God will not lead in any other way. John says of the redeemed that they are people who “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4). The followers cannot follow unless they know where to go, and they know because the leader has led the way by personal example.

In the context of Revelation, it is implicit that followers prove the quality of their training by their ability to perform in the absence of their mentor. The principle that was modeled in the life of Jesus has been understood and inter-

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nalized in His followers to the point that they will continue the course mapped out by the leader even when they are physically left to themselves. This, to be sure, is no easy task because, in the final analysis, Revelation describes the prospect of martyrdom. “If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed” (13:10, NIV). This text appears at one of the points in the story where there is direct eye contact between the reader and the audience so as to make sure that the take-home point is not missed.<sup>7</sup> “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints,” the narrator interjects (13:10, NIV).

John also says of “those who share in the first resurrection” that “they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years” (20:6). From the point of view of the leader, the mentoring that has taken place is not meant to be passive. If transparency inevitably means accountability, it also brings empowerment. To be “priests of God and of Christ” suggests the ability to speak authoritatively on behalf of God and Christ; to “reign with him” suggests a genuine power-sharing arrangement. At this point those who were led have themselves become leaders. This was God’s purpose from the very beginning. The redeemed have received the capacity to explain God’s ways in a way that represents God correctly, and they have a mandate to execute policy.

On this point Revelation seems to be fully in tune with the leadership ideal that is envisioned by Jesus in the Gospel of John; “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). This ideal is not scaled back or rescinded in Revelation, where disciples will be “priests of God and of Christ” and “reign with him a thousand years” (Rev. 20:6). In Revelation, too, the servant has been told everything that Jesus has heard from the Father (1:1–3; cf. John 15:15); the disciple knows what the Master is doing, and the relationship rests on the transparent rock of divine revelation.

## Revelation’s View as Corrective

In the Roman imperial system, the *imperator* lived according to the definition of his title: he was “the ruler answerable to none.” He ruled by decree, not by persuasion or consent. Accountability in the imperial system of government took the form of assassination. Transparency is decidedly not the first word that comes to mind in this type of governance and leadership. It goes almost without saying that Revelation’s God is not an imperial figure even though notions of imperial sovereignty are widely diffused in Christian theology.

Plato (427–347 BC), the foremost political philosopher of the ancient world and probably of all time, did not advocate an outright imperial system of gov-

<sup>7</sup>Similar exclamatory and hortatory phrases are found in Revelation 13:18, 14:12, and 17:9.

ernment, but transparency was low on the scale of values in his Utopian state. His ideal was stability. To achieve stability, expediency must trump transparency. “I mean,” Socrates says in Plato’s *Republic*, “that our rulers will find a considerable dose of falsehood and deceit necessary for the good of their subjects.” Lying is justified because it has a corrective medicinal purpose, in this case to facilitate Plato’s vision of state-sponsored eugenics, to depersonalize motherhood, and to prevent parental bonding. The specifics are in the present context less important than the principle, and the principle is unequivocal: It is legitimate to practice falsehood if the governing body is doing it for the common good.

In *Laws*, another of Plato’s books on statecraft and leadership, the ideal is for the subject to follow orders and have no mind of his or her own. To this end, it should not be in the mind of anyone “to do anything, either in jest or earnest, of his own motion, but in war and in peace he should look to and follow his leader, even in the least things being under his guidance.” Defenders of Plato have reacted with outrage at the suggestion that Plato deserves to be seen as the most beguiling ideologue of totalitarian systems of government along the lines suggested by Karl Popper,<sup>8</sup> but even Plato’s most ardent defenders will be hard pressed to defend transparency, accountability, and the rule of law on the basis of Plato’s writings. Indeed, as I. F. Stone suggests in his discussion of Plato’s representation of the trial and death of Socrates, it is likely that Plato conveniently omits mentioning Socrates’s opposition to Athenian democracy and his intimate relationship with some of the leaders who violently tried to overturn it. “In the elegant and seductive phrases of his *Apology*, Plato does not allow these political events to obtrude on the reader, though they were fresh in the memories of the judges. Nor does he mention them anywhere in his many dialogues,” says Stone. If this is correct, neither Plato nor those who try to honor his legacy are particularly fond of transparency.

Writing over a century before John on Patmos, Posidonius of Apameia (135–51 BC) is similarly unable to accommodate the values found in Revelation. In his view, too, genuine leadership values commands over explanations and authority over transparency.

A law should be brief, so that the unskilled may grasp it more easily. Let it be like a voice from heaven; let it order, not argue. Nothing seems to be more pedantic, more pointless than a law with a preamble. Advise me, tell me what you want me to do; I am not learning, I am obeying. (p. 654)

In this vision of leadership, the leader does not fret over process. Speaking to both sides of the issue, of the leader and of the person being led, Posidonius wants commands and not explanations from his leader. As Seneca later para-

<sup>8</sup>The first volume deals with Plato, the second with Hegel and Marx.

<sup>9</sup>Seneca, quoted in Patrick D. Miller, “The Ethics of the Commandments.”

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phrased this saying, “Tell me what I have to do . . . I do not want to learn. I want to obey.”<sup>9</sup> The leadership ideal in Revelation corrects this vision for leadership in two directions: the leader as well as the person being led.

Nicolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) ranks far below Plato in terms of influence, but he stands out in the annals of thinkers who have espoused enduring theories of leadership. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes approvingly of the cunning with which Pope Alexander VI (r. 1492–1503), the former Rodrigo Borgia and one of the great Renaissance pontiffs, managed to get his way in the power play of Europe. “Alexander VI was concerned only with deceiving men, and he always found them gullible,” says Machiavelli. “No man ever affirmed anything more forcefully or with stronger oaths but kept his word less. Nevertheless, his deceptions were always effective, because he well understood the naivety of men.” The principle of transparency does not appear in Machiavelli’s thought any more than in Plato’s dialogues. For the Florentine political handyman, the good leader is results-oriented and not overly concerned with principles. To win the war counts more than to ascertain whether the war is just. The ruler who wins the battle will also win in the court of public opinion even if his cause is unjust. “For the common people are impressed by appearances and results,” Machiavelli says knowingly.

These thoughts on leadership have to do with affairs of government. A discussion of the leadership ideals in Revelation could obviously turn in other directions, to corporate leadership, church governance, or leadership in institutions. Revelation is in a sense a secular and world-oriented book, deeply concerned with issues of governance in the world. Beginning with the Roman Empire in the days of John, Revelation provides a sketch of powers vying for domination on the world scene until the return of Jesus. In Revelation 13, for instance, the topic of concern even extends to powers that appear to profess loyalty to God while actually subverting them. For this reason it is appropriate, in closing, to allow Revelation’s ideal of transparent leadership to speak to the ideals of both religious and political powers in the world today. In the religious arena, obviously one significant power in society is the Roman Catholic Church. In the realm of politics, the United States of America is obviously such a power. The message of Revelation reveals a principle of leadership—transparency—that applies throughout all creation, the political and social world as well as the spiritual.

How does Revelation’s commitment to transparent leadership resonate in the leading democracy in human history and in the leading religious institution of all time?

The answer to this question has many facets, but the overall trend is unmistakable: Transparent leadership has fallen on hard times. The Roman Catholic

Church may be the least transparent institution human civilization has ever seen, and, arguably, it reflects the nature of other religious institutions in that regard. It has successfully weathered modern demands for openness, substituting vigorous public relations for transparent policy. The sex scandals that have come to light in the church toward the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium may be seen as aberrations in terms of priestly behavior, but they are not aberrations in terms of church governance. Those who have tried to make headway against the terrible wrongs that have been committed against them have confronted a wall of silence. It is not an anachronism to single out absence of transparent leadership as the most characteristic feature of this institution throughout much of its history. Its leadership, not unlike that of the Roman imperial system, is essentially and explicitly a leadership accountable to none. Where Revelation espouses a commitment to transparency, the church, in its ideology and arcane structure, embodies commitments that are imperiously contrary to the transparency that lies at the heart of Revelation's message. Again, this characteristic is reflective of other religious institutions as well, in Christianity and in other religious traditions.

The national and international affairs of nations have also been marked by an absence of transparency. For about a century or so, even the government of the United States has backed away from this commitment. In a book on government deception and secrecy in the United States in the twentieth century, David Wise writes that "the governed must know to what they are consenting" for democracy to work. This requirement is in a precarious state. Wise shows that secrecy and state-sponsored deception are on the rise not in some underdeveloped foreign land but in the country that leads the "free" world. Concealment is in; openness and accountability are out. The Orwellian vision is coming to fruition not only in totalitarian systems of government, but also in countries that profess a commitment to openness. Expediency, as in Plato's *Republic*, trumps transparency in the modern state. The late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, also chronicling the rise of secrecy in the US government, writes ruefully toward the end of his book, "The Cold War ended; secrecy continued as a mode of governance as if nothing had changed." In the introduction to Moynihan's book, Richard Gid Powers quotes Lord Acton with the understanding that the latter gave a succinct account of what is at stake. "Everything secret degenerates, even the administration of justice; nothing is safe that does not show how it can bear discussion and publicity."

Revelation concurs with this judgment. Trustworthy leadership must be transparent. This book offers no refuge to leaders who place results over principles or who bypass the pain of transparency for short-term gain. The transparency that comes to view in Revelation aims to expose deception at its

source and to banish it from the society of created beings in heaven and on earth. Revelation looks to God as the source and defender of transparent leadership. It poses a formidable corrective to human expediency, speaking to the physician who relates to his or her patient with an attitude of paternalism; to the lender who conceals from the borrower the actual risk; to the board that votes in secret on some matter or person, knowing that they will not have to explain their decision; to the guardians of archives who try to limit access to information; to persons who censor books and opinions; and to religious institutions that behave as though they are absolved from accountability. Quite apart from the particular and specific attempts to subvert God's ways that are exposed in Revelation, this book holds its reader to a standard that those who claim to revere its message often miss.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the leadership implications of the word that gives the last book of the Bible its title. The principle discovered in the nature of the book of Revelation is *transparent* leadership. This ideology is announced in the opening word. Revelation corrects religious, political, and other institutions that thrive on secrecy and concealment. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near," says the narrator in Revelation (1:3). Blessed, too, is the leader who takes Revelation's quest for transparency to heart, and the fellow member of the community who demands transparency from all engaged in leadership.

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