

Revelation 7:9-17: The Innumerable Crowd Before the One Upon the Throne and the Lamb¹

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Having survived the dire predictions of the so-called “Turn of the Millennium,” which doesn’t actually begin until 2001, relatively unscathed, perhaps it is time to reconsider John’s message in Revelation. This is especially so in light of all the irresponsible excesses of some who managed to combine a gross misunderstanding of the nature of biblical prophecy in general, and apocalyptic in particular, with the more extreme warnings about the dangers of “Y2K.²” Thus, we were inundated with predictions by cable preachers, and even cable channels, such as The Learning Channel, about how the so called turn of the millennium will usher in a new and more dreadful age. In 2000 the prophecies of Revelation or Nostradamus or Joe Prophet will be fulfilled, with great earthquakes, terrors, and even, perhaps before the year is out, the return of the Lord.

Yet do these people recall the explicit statement of Jesus in Mk 13:32, that neither the angels nor the Son of Man know the day or the hour of Christ’s return? Are they also oblivious to Acts 1:7, where Jesus tells his disciples that it is not for them to know that day and hour that the kingdom is restored to Israel? Is this why they also grossly misrepresent the nature of biblical prophecy itself? For they substitute a concept of prophecy more suitable to the views of ancient astrologers, where it titillates the curiosity or provides a guide map through the future, for the biblical idea of proclamation of God’s word to

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²Incidentally, one might notice that it seems the more people are into predicting the end of the world, the more they employ “techno-speak” rather than plain English, talking of “Y2K” rather than the “Year 2000,” as if computerize gives them credibility.

inform the life of the community. Thus, John's concern, to provide a word of comfort in the expectation of persecution,³ is ignored.

The result is that the power of the Apocalypse is undermined. We are not exposed to its true message, which calls upon readers or hearers to decide between two opposing and irreconcilable claims. Will the readers submit to the rule of God and the Lamb, or will they be deceived by the vile parody of divine authority represented by Rome? Will they be a people who live in radical obedience to God, or will they perish with the rest of humanity? In the course of his vision, John provides us with a glimpse into heaven, of which Rev 7:9-17, like chs. 4-5 is an instance. As in the earlier chapters, John uses imagery derived from imperial court ritual, with its ceremony of universal acclamation, to indicate that, for the Christian, there can be no compromise. When we carefully observe these verses, especially in comparison with the claims of those who follow the Beast in Rev. 13 as well as the fate of those who accept the sign of the Beast in chs. 16 and 19, we find that while the bliss of the saints is described, something more is also at work. These verses are nothing less than subversive. They call upon readers to decide who is God. In this respect, they are of vital relevance for us today, when we are confronted with the idolatry of the state, or of consumerism, or of an ever-increasing GDP. These verses remind us that sovereignty ultimately belongs to God and the Lamb, and it is only as we are shepherded by the Lamb that we find our true rest. To accomplish this task, John: (1) employs common themes throughout Revelation to emphasize his message; (2) uses court ritual to show that whatever Rome and Caesar demand illegitimately belongs to God and Christ by right; and (3) reverses the usual standards of victory and defeat, to show that only in accepting the vocation of the Lamb of God are the people of God able to triumph and attain a secure place in God and Christ's eternal Kingdom.

John Uses Common Themes in Revelation to Emphasize His Message.

Rev 7 constitutes an interlude between the opening of the sixth seal in 6:12-17 and the seventh seal in Rev. 8:1-5. In this interlude, two scenes are described, the sealing of the 144,000 in Rev. 7:1-8, and the great multitude

³ I agree with A. Yarbro Collins in Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 70, that, while John anticipates an impending persecution, at present there is not enough evidence to conclude that such persecution occurred in the reign of Domitian. Rather, John reflects the expectation of persecution more than persecution itself.

worshiping the One Sitting upon the throne and the Lamb in Rev. 7:9-17. Scholars are divided as to whether these are two distinct groups, or the same people described in different ways.⁴ We need not concern ourselves with these somewhat arcane issues here. What is to be noticed is that throughout ch. 7 the reader or hearer is referred to both what precedes and what follows. The 144,000 of Rev. 7: 4-8 are referred to again in Rev 14:1-5.⁵ Likewise, the sealing of the saints in Rev. 7:2-3 is demonically imitated or parodied by the Beast in Rev 13:16. In the same way, the great multitude before the throne of God and the Lamb is described earlier in Rev 5:9.⁶ Furthermore, just as the great multitude of 7:10 standing before the heavenly throne proclaim "Salvation," or, more accurately, "Victory,"⁷ so we find a blasphemous echo in the acclamation of the nations in 13:4. When they behold the healing of one of the heads of the beast, they worship the dragon, and call out, "Who is similar

⁴ Those who say that these are two different groups include: R. W. Wall, Revelation (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 118; G. R. Beasley-Murray, The Book of Revelation (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 139-140; W. Bousset, Die Offenbarung Johannis (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1906), 287-290; D. E. Aune, Revelation (WBC 52; Dallas: Word, 1997-1999), 447. Among the scholars who hold that the two groups are identical are: I T. Beckwith, The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction With a Critical and Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967, c1919), 540; J. Roloff, Revelation (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 98; R.C. Charles, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920) 201 (where the innumerable multitude are the martyrs, who were sealed when alive in 7:4-8); G.K. Beale, The Book of Revelation (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 426-430.

⁵ That they are likely the same group, see Charles, 1:202-203; Aune, Revelation, 460; Beale, 416-423.

⁶ R. Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 215; D. Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," BR 28 (1983) 5-26; Beal, 426, etc.

⁷ W. Foerster, "σώζω, κτλ," TDNT, 7:997-998; G. B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John the Divine (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 100; Aune, Revelation 6-16, 470.

to the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?" Yet, it is not the beast that is triumphant and victorious. It is the Lamb who conquers, and is the true benefactor of his followers.

In short, John, speaking to the readers of his day, demonstrates that the rule of the beast, far from being impressive, is merely a sham. It gains its credibility only to the extent that it imitates the true victory of God and Christ. Like the Lamb who was slain in ch 5, one of the heads of the beast is as slain to death, but is healed. As the heavenly multitude adores the Lamb in chs 5 and 7, so the inhabitants of the earth follow after the sign of the healing of the head of the beast. Yet, the true domain of each is demonstrated in John's description. The Lamb and God inhabit heaven. Their reign is eternal. The beast is earthly, inspired by the dragon which emerges from the sea, which symbolizes chaos.⁸ Likewise, the nations share the fate of the beast, which is ultimately cast into the lake of fire, along with its lord, the Devil (Rev 20:7-9). On the other hand, the description of the saints in Rev. 7:10, 13 anticipates their participation in the victory of the Rider in Rev. 19:11-16. In both cases the clothing of the heavenly multitude is described as white, which in Revelation is not so much the color of purity as it is of victory and conquest.⁹ Furthermore, the Lamb in 7:17 and the rider in 19:15 are said to shepherd their people. Thus, the Lamb is identified with the victorious Rider, who bears the title "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," which the Roman emperor, represented in the figure of the beast, ascribes to himself.

Yet, the contrast between the fate of the victorious saints in heaven and the earth bound worshippers of the beast does not end here. In Rev. 7:16 we see the promise of Isa. 49:10 quoted, that the followers of the Lamb, "will not hunger, nor will they thirst nor will the sun fall upon them nor any heat." This picture contrasts sharply with the portrayal of the fourth bowl in Rev. 16:8-9, where the sun is struck and burns the inhabitants of the earth, who then blaspheme the name of God. In short, in both their devotion to God and in their fate the saints are contrasted with those who refuse to acknowledge God and Christ.

⁸ See A. Yarbro Collins, The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation (HDR 9; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).

⁹ See the description of the first horse and rider in Rev. 6:2. Also see, D.L. Barr, Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998) 9, 74.

Yet, while there is much in Rev. 7:9-17 that is echoed in other parts of the Apocalypse, John also uses other imagery, which eludes many of today's readers. The reason is because John incorporates imagery from court ritual to demonstrate further that all that Rome claims illegitimately belongs to God and Christ by right. Thus, Rome's pomp and ceremony is achieved only through borrowing and misusing scenes of heavenly splendor. Readers are, therefore, reminded not to be deceived by majesty of Rome, for they serve an even more magnificent Lord. John's use of this imagery will now be discussed briefly.

Use of Court Ritual

In both Rev 5 and 7 John incorporates imagery, which would have been very familiar to those who knew court ritual, especial in cities like Ephesus and Pergamum, where the imperial cult was especially strong.¹⁰ At the same time, it was not unusual for rulers to be acclaimed as gods in the eastern Mediterranean, especially in Hellenistic cities.¹¹ This status was ascribed to victorious Roman generals, and likewise was bestowed upon visiting Roman emperors.¹² Thus, John, as well as his readers, would have been in a position to have witnessed this ritual in the context of civic life in Asia Minor. It is, therefore, no accident that the Seer picks up such imagery in his description of the heavenly court. By so doing he directs the focus of his readers or hearers away from the pomp of civic ceremony, which makes such strong claims upon believers, but with which he allows no compromise.¹³ Participation in the trade

¹⁰See R.E. Oster, "Ephesus," ABD 2:544-545; on Pergamum see Aune, Revelation, 180-181.

¹¹ D. E. Aune, "The Influence of Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Book of Revelation," 16.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See John's condemnation of "Jezebeel" (2:20-23) in the letter to Thyatira, and those holding to the teaching of Balaam (2:14-15) in the letter to Pergamum. See Yarbro Collins, Crisis and Catharsis, 87-88, as well as W.M. Ramsay, The Letters to the Seven Churches (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1985, c1904), 298-301.

guilds, which require some allegiance to the patron deities or imperial cult, is ruled out.¹⁴

There are two aspects of our verses, which, in particular, are reminiscent of imperial court ritual. First, the Seer observes that a great multitude from every nation standing before the divine throne. This imagery is similar to the concept of universal consensus, whereby the Roman emperor, upon accession, is bestowed a certain legitimacy. As representative of the empire, the acclamation of an emperor by the senate was considered the acclamation of all the peoples of the empire. This feature is also demonstrated on imperial coins, especially those of Nero, which in the last year of his reign bore the inscription, which translated means, "The security of the people of Rome."¹⁵ This claim, and others like it, are shown in 7:9-10 to be a blasphemous parody of the saints' acclamation of, "Victory to our God sitting upon the Throne and to the Lamb." Security, ultimately, is not found in the person of the emperor, but in God and Christ.

Furthermore, the senatorial ceremony of universal acclamation is shown to be a sham imitation of the true glory given to God and the Lamb. While the senate pretends to bestow universal acclamation to the emperor, God and the Lamb actually receive it, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue. Rome may have incorporated and conquered many peoples, but their numbers fade into insignificance in comparison with the even greater multitude which proclaim their victory in God and Christ.

Another aspect of imperial court ritual echoed in our text is also found in 4:8, 11; 5:9-10; 11:15 and elsewhere. That is the hymn of praise to God and Christ given by the multitude. As early as Julius Caesar, "claims to divinity and encouragement of divine honors were part of the imperial program."¹⁶ While few such acclamations survive, it does appear that Roman emperors, borrowing from the ceremonies of the Greek rulers of Asia Minor, used hymns with antiphonal responses.¹⁷ We find a similar phenomenon in Rev. 7:9-12. In 7:10, there is the acclamation of victory, similar to that at the emperor's accession to the throne. In Rev. 7:12, there is the response. By this means the Seer shows

¹⁴ See, Ramsay, The Letters to the Seven Churches, 346-353.

¹⁵ Aune, "Imperial Court Ritual," 18-19.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Aune, Revelation, 316.

that for Christians, their allegiance and loyalty belongs not to the blasphemous claims of the emperor or Rome, but to the Creator of the Universe, and his designated agent who has achieved victory. Rome and Caesar claim illegitimately what belongs only to God and Christ by right. The people of God are called to recognize this fact, and act accordingly, by not submitting to imperial claims.

Yet, if Christians are challenged to recognize that their Lord is not Caesar, but the true victor, Christ, so too are they challenged to redefine the character of victory. Is it to be understood in the militaristic terms of Rome? Is it triumphal? Or is it something else? Just as John demonstrates that the claims of Rome are false, and but a sham and demonic imitation of the allegiance, glory and praise which belongs to God and Christ alone, So does he transform our understanding of victory. For victory is not found in military conquest, but in adopting the vocation of the Lamb, by becoming obedient until death.

Reversal of the Usual Standards of Victory

One of the truly remarkable features about the Book of Revelation is, for all of its violent and disturbing imagery; it does not call upon Christians to prepare for military conflict. While the heavenly armies descend upon God's enemies, led by the one riding a white horse (Rev. 19:11-15), no battle is actually described. Unlike the War Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls,¹⁸ there is no order of battle. There is no call to take up arms. We are simply told in 19:17-18 that one angel standing in the sun summons the birds to the great banquet of God. While we hear much in popular literature about the "Battle of Armageddon," in fact it is more like the "victorious non-battle against the opponents of God."

Yet, such a phenomenon is only fitting, for John's vision is constantly surprising us with its mutation of images. Thus, the "Lion of the Tribe of Judah" of 5:5, becomes the Lamb standing as slain (5:6). The saints are victorious in 7:10, but only to the extent that they come out of, that is, endure the tribulation and wash their garments white in the blood of the Lamb. While the imagery of the cleansing power of sacrificial blood is found in the OT (see Isa 1:18; 64:6; Zech. 3:3-5),¹⁹ the vivid character of the description is,

¹⁸. 1QM 5:3-6:17

¹⁹. Beale, 436.

nevertheless, striking. If this is not enough, as we proceed Rev 12:10-11 tells us of a great voice in heaven, which proclaims:

Now has come the salvation [or victory] and power
And kingdom of our God
And the authority of His Christ
Because the accuser of our brothers and sisters is cast out
The one accusing them before God day and night.
And they conquered him through the blood of the Lamb
And on account of the word of their witness
And they did not love their lives until death

Conquest is achieved, but not through power. Nor is it the result of an exercise of raw military force on the part of the saints. Instead, like Christ they have endured wrongful accusation and death. Yet, God will vindicate them when they, like Christ, are raised.²⁰ When God's time is accomplished, he will answer the prayer of those portrayed in the fifth seal of 6:9-11, who are asking how long will it be until their blood is avenged. God is faithful, and will act. But the point of Revelation is that the victory is ultimately God's, not ours. The readers cannot take up the same weapons as Rome. For despite its arrogance, Rome will be judged. At the point when it assumes it achieves victory, in the death of Christians, it assures its own defeat. A defeat sealed, not by a lion or an eagle, but a Lamb, even a Lamb that was slain.

Conclusion

Yet, as we read this passage, what does all this mean for us? First, we notice that the human heart hasn't changed in two thousand years. If anything, the secular state of the twentieth century has claimed more lives, and has made even more blasphemous claims than Rome ever did. What was hailed at its beginnings as the "Christian Century" has, instead been the "Century of Warfare" (as one video series calls it), or, perhaps more accurately, the "Century of Genocide." Whether it be the Turks slaughtering Armenians in the first years of the twentieth century, to the Holocaust, to the millions slaughtered in the purges of the former Soviet Union or the "Great Leap Forward" in China, to the massacres in the Balkans and Africa today. The State claims ultimate obedience, and those who don't fit in, which is becoming more and more the case with Christians in this post Christian age, become not human beings but

²⁰. Beale, 664.

eggs. In this context, “you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs” seems a favorite slogan.

Against these claims, John calls on Christians to say an emphatic “No.” We are not to resist with the same weapons as our opponents.²¹ This view seems foolish. Yet, even in living memory, whether it be the Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. King’s principles of non-violence, or the collapse of the Soviet Empire, when Christians stand prayerfully against systematic evil, great things can be accomplished. Perhaps not it will not be according to our timetable of instant gratification, but it will be in the time decreed by the Sovereignty of God. We are disturbed by this state of affairs, and in many respects none of us, not even the Seer, are able to give a satisfactory answer. Yet, we are called to radical obedience, radical faith, in a radical, and ultimately subversive Gospel. It is then that we also receive the promise of Rev. 7:17,

That the Lamb in the midst of the throne will shepherd them,
And will lead them to the living waters.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Abbreviations

Biblical Books

Isa.	Isaiah
Rev .	Revelation
Zech.	Zechariah

Dead Sea Scrolls

1QM	War Scroll.
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Secondary Sources

ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
<u>BR</u>	<u>Biblical Research</u>
CC	Continental Commentaries
<u>EQ</u>	<u>Evangelical Quarterly</u>

²¹ For applications of this theme to a Christian pacifist agenda, see J.L. Coker, “Peace and the Apocalypse: Stanley Hauerwas and Miroslav Volf on the Eschatological Basis for Christian Nonviolence,” EQ 71 (1999), 261-268. While I do not necessarily agree with such a position, an interesting combination of themes of Christian eschatology with a realistic appraisal of human nature is provided.

HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HNTC	Harper New Testament Commentaries
ICC	International Critical Commentary
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer Kommentar)
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NIGNTC	New International Greek New Testament Commentary
<u>TDNT</u>	<u>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</u>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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