

# Scripture

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## THE VIRGIN FOLLOWERS OF THE LAMB

In the thirteenth chapter of the Apocalypse the sacred author presents a fearsome vision of the persecutors of the Church. It is here that he describes the multi-headed beast which seems to lead the whole world after it (v. 3). The blasphemies it utters against God are accompanied by its persecution of His elect, the saints (vv. 5-7); indeed, so complete is its victory over mankind that the Apostle can only counsel patience in suffering—'Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints' (v. 10). This horror is followed by a similar one: a second beast rises up, working great signs and deceiving men by its awful power (vv. 11-14). Its followers are marked with its sign and none but they are permitted to buy or sell (vv. 16-17).

To this fearful vision of Chapter 13 succeeds another, as reassuring and consoling as the former was terrifying. John beholds a lamb standing on the summit of Mount Zion. Surrounding him are his followers, the 144,000 who are marked with his name and that of his Father (v. 1). New wonders are recorded in contrast to the awesome deeds of the beast. A voice is heard from heaven; a new song is sung, a canticle which none can learn but the 144,000, those who are the redeemed from the earth (vv. 2-3).

Who are the 144,000 of John's vision? What is to be understood of his designation of them as virgins? What does he mean by this term in the context of Chapter 14? Who, first of all, are the 144,000? The author has chosen the same figure which he earlier employed to indicate the number of the elect (7:4). In the former case they are the servants of God, those 'who have been sealed upon their foreheads' (7:3). They are, then, the elect, those who have been marked out as the chosen ones of God. The choice of this particular number is perhaps seen in the identification of the Church as the new Israel; they are grouped on Mt Zion; the twelve Patriarchs have become the twelve Apostles, fathers of the twelve tribes of this Chosen People.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although the image is changed from that of earthly tribes to that of a heavenly celebration attended by 'a great multitude which no man could number' (7:9), the picture is still that of the elect. These are now expressly represented as those redeemed through the death of Christ; it is in 'the blood of the lamb' that they have 'washed their robes and made them white' (7:14).

The picture is that of the multitude of the elect and it is this same image that should be seen in 14:1. As Cerfaux-Cambier note: 'One should recall the visions of Chapter 7, parallel to this one. In that case, too, there was a vision of 144,000. We identified them with the multitude of the elect. If then they represented that multitude, that totality, it is reasonable that they represent the same thing again in the present case.'<sup>1</sup>

Again they are signed, now no longer by the seal of the Father alone, but they bear the name of the lamb as well (14:1). Thus they are directly contrasted with that other multitude of Chapter 13, the followers of the beast who bear his name on their forehead or on their right hand (13:16-17). They alone can learn the new canticle, the song which had been sung before the throne by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures:

Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God  
from every tribe and tongue and people and nation,  
and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on earth. (5:9)

Now it would be their turn to intone the song, with God, the elders and the living creatures as the audience (14:3); certainly this would be the most fitting reply to the blasphemous utterances of the followers of the beast: 'Who is like the beast and who can fight against it?' (13:4). Theirs are the voices of those purchased by the blood of Christ, those redeemed from the world.

Then with the added emphasis of a triple parallel construction John gives a further description of these 144,000—'It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.'<sup>2</sup> What does the apostle mean: that they are virgins in the strict and literal sense of the term? Or does he mean that they are chaste, that they have

<sup>1</sup> L. Cerfaux and J. Cambier, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean lue aux Chrétiens* (Paris 1955), p. 125; cf. also T. Calmes, *Apocalypse* (Paris 1905), p. 188; G. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (London 1953), p. 1186. Against such an interpretation, however, some exegetes protest that the force of 14:4a makes it inconceivable that women could be included in the writer's intention. Thus Charles writes, 'If we take these words literally, it is obvious that they cannot be used of women. Nor indeed can they be applied to women in any intelligible sense, whatever the metaphorical meaning that we may attach to the words (*Revelation*, pp. 8-9).' Lohmeyer, however, sees the explanation of this fact in the ancient image of Christ as the commander of an army of his followers in the great battle against the Antichrist (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Tübingen 1926, p. 120). Thus Tambyah, too, looks upon the 144,000 as 'the warrior bodyguard of the lamb' ('Virgins in Rev. 14, 4,' *Expository Times* xxxii (1920-1), p. 139). cf. also G. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 1186.

<sup>2</sup> The RSV renders *παρθένου γὰρ εἶσαν* as 'for they are chaste.' For the sake of this discussion, however, the literal rendering of *παρθένου* has been employed in the text.

observed purity in all their relations with the opposite sex, whether in marriage or outside the marriage bond? Or, finally, is the expression not intended in any but a metaphorical sense? Is John merely attributing a general fidelity to God's law under the figure of sexual correctness: perfect moral integrity, perhaps, for they are spotless (v. 5); or perhaps he indicates that they had never permitted themselves to be defiled by the impurity of the false worship of pagan deities?

If the original understanding of the 144,000 indicated above is allowed, then the apostle cannot be using 'virgins' in its literal acceptance. Surely he would not exclude from the total number of the elect those who have not preserved their virginity? What of the apostles who had taken wives; what of the heads of the primitive Christian communities who had entered into matrimony? It must rather be in some figurative use of the term that the sacred author's true meaning is to be found. It would seem that the most frequent metaphorical use of this image of sexual immorality in the Bible is to convey the notion of idolatry. Especially is this true of the prophets. Thus one reads in Ezechiel:

Again the word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations and say, Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: . . . you trusted in your beauty, and played the harlot because of your renown, and lavished your harlotries on any passer-by. You took some of your garments, and made for yourself gaily decked shrines, and on them played the harlot. . . . Wherefore, O harlot, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Because your shame was laid bare and your nakedness uncovered in your harlotries with your lovers, and because of all your idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers, with whom you took pleasure all those you loved and all those you loathed; I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness.'<sup>1</sup>

For this reason Boismard notes that 'this expression ought to be taken in a metaphorical sense; lust and debauchery are participation in the worship of idols. . . . The 144,000 are virgins in this sense that they are not given over to the worship of pagan idols, especially to that of the beast.'<sup>2</sup>

Other authors do not discover so fine a precision in the figure used by the sacred author. Thus Calmes believes that 'the word virgin should be understood in the sense of continent and designates the

<sup>1</sup> Ez. 16:1-3; 15-17; 35-7; cf. also ch. 23. How similar to the words of Ezechiel condemning the idolatry of Jerusalem are those of John himself in Apoc. 17:1-2; 4-5; cf. also ch. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Apocalypse* (Paris 1950), p. 61. Delling, too, sees the virgins as those who have persevered in their purity despite the temptation to idolatry (*Th.W.*, V, p. 835).

Christians who have remained pure from corruption,' while Bonsirven feels that it designates 'fidelity to the law of God.'<sup>1</sup>

These are the chosen ones, the elect, who follow the lamb, wherever he goes (14:4b). The author's expression is surely redolent of the evangelist's phrase in the fourth gospel 'follow me.' It is, moreover, a fulfilment of the prophecy of his earlier vision :

For the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd  
and he will guide them to springs of living water.<sup>2</sup>

They are also those who 'have been redeemed from mankind as sacrifices for God and the lamb' (14:4c). ἀπαρχή in this verse is better seen as indicating their sacrificial character than the more limited notion of first-fruits. These followers of the lamb, then, offer their lives in sacrifice, for such was the demand of the saviour to all who would be his true disciples and follow him.<sup>3</sup>

Is there, then, in this verse no notion of virginity in its literal sense? Cerfaux replies by drawing attention to the parallelism between this pericope and Chapter 7. In each case the sacred author speaks of the whole multitude of the elect. In the earlier passage he portrays them under the figure of martyrdom; these are those 'who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the lamb' (7:14). Martyrdom has been chosen because 'the martyrs are Christians *par excellence*'<sup>4</sup> and the life of the great mass of Christians is described after the pattern of their lives. The same is true in the case of virginity in the present context. It is the example of this elite in their midst on which Christians must model their lives. Thus Cerfaux sums up the point: 'The dragon leads men to idolatry; but this is presented in the Scriptures under the

<sup>1</sup> T. Calmes, *op. cit.*, p. 188; J. Bonsirven, *Vocabulaire Biblique*, p. 182. Beasley-Murray notes that 'it seems best to interpret the language of verse 4 as symbolic denoting the spiritual purity of men and women who form the bride of Christ' (*op. cit.*, p. 1186). In this matter, therefore, the writer parts company with those commentators, both Catholic and non-Catholic, who see in this verse a literal reference by the Seer to virginity or celibacy. Allo, for instance, sees the proper literal meaning of παρθένος as the only true interpretation (*Apoc.*, p. 217), and Drach states that John here refers to those who have not been changed by the marriage act, whose virginal purity has not been lost through sexual union (*Apocalypse de saint Jean* (Paris 1879), p. 130. *cf.* also E. Lohmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 120).

<sup>2</sup> Apoc. 7:17. In the Fourth Gospel (1:43), the words noted in the text (ἀκολουθε μοι) are addressed by the Saviour to Philipp when he received his apostolic vocation. It is the identical expression by which the Lord directed Peter to follow him in the final scene depicted by John in his gospel (21:19). *cf.* also Mk. 2:14; Lk. 9:59.

<sup>3</sup> Mt. 10:38; 16:24-5. It should be noted that the text here has departed from the RSV in its interpretation of ἀπαρχή. In support of this understanding of this term *cf.* R. Charles, *Revelation II*, p. 9; E. Lohmeyer, *op. cit.*, p. 120; E. Allo, *Apoc.*, p. 217; G. Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 1186.

<sup>4</sup> Cerfaux-Cambier, *Apocalypse*, p. 125

figure of prostitution. In contrast, then, all those who belong to the lamb ought to be called virgins: they have not given themselves up to the prostitution of idolatry. This does not eliminate all allusion to virginity in its proper sense, however. As with martyrdom, virginity is the most excellent representation of the Christian life. Just as one cannot be saved without sharing in the dignity of martyrdom, so one is equally incapable of salvation without participating in virginity. Virginity is a heavenly perfection, an anticipation, for those called to it, of what will be the objective of all in the Kingdom of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

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### THE HOLY EUCHARIST IN ST JOHN—II

The brief summary of St John's doctrine on the Holy Eucharist<sup>2</sup> could only be presented on the basis of a number of preceding conclusions. Consequently it is now necessary to state and justify them in order to test the soundness of that summary. Briefly they may be reduced to two: first that the whole of the discourse which follows the narration of the feeding and the walking on the sea is a discourse on the Eucharist; and second, that this discourse is written for the instruction of the Christians who frequently celebrate the Eucharist at the time the Fourth Gospel was finally completed. It was on account of these conclusions that the Johannine doctrine of the Eucharist was stated to be concerned with the benefit accruing to the individual Christian when he partakes of the Eucharist, and with the need for belief precisely in regard to this sacrament.

But many would not agree with this doctrinal synthesis, precisely because they would reject the foregoing conclusions. Perhaps there are some who would wish to accept the doctrinal synthesis whilst still repudiating the conclusions reached by the preceding exegetical and literary study of the text. This latter course seems impossible; the attitude of the former has much to commend it, for in point of fact there have always been those who have denied any reference whatsoever to the Eucharist in Jn. 6. This may be surprising, since the weight of ecclesiastical tradition has always considered Chapter 6 to be concerned with the Eucharist, and has usually referred to it more

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Scripture* 1963, pp. 97-103