

Exegesis of Revelation 19:1-11 The Hallelujah Chorus

Just a couple of days ago someone noted what prominent movie reviewers are saying about this year's movies. The verdict is in. The ones that are succeeding are those that have the theme of revenge. Unsuccessful in business or love: blow your unfaithful partner away; if those poor wretches in Iraq execute one of ours—we will take ten of theirs. Don't get mad: get even. That is the watchword of the day.

All of this is not a point of casual interest to an interpreter of the book of Revelation. Popular opinion has it that this is a book about vengeance; and there are reasons why ordinary readers may come to such a conclusion. Here we have the prophet John. By any fair account he is a marginalized follower of a crucified Jew giving a minority report on the power of the Roman Empire. While poets, artists, and historians celebrate Rome's invincibility, this exile on a tiny little island off the coast of Turkey (Roman Asia) takes an opposite perspective. His view is that Rome, representative of all earthly powers and forces, which convince themselves that they are ultimate, is destined for the dustbin of history. To be sure, in the near future there will be difficult days for those who claim that the risen Jesus is Lord of history. Although John constantly assures believers that they are sealed by the living God, Revelation 6:10-11 openly states that some will be martyred for the cause in the near future. But when the coming crisis is all over, in a predictive mode, we learn that Babylon (Rome) will be in ruins; and in the opening verses of our unit (19:1-11) God's judgment already has fallen upon the **great harlot and he has avenged the blood of his servants killed by her hand.**

Revenge or Justice

Is this sweet revenge like the poor peasants of France overthrowing the nobility in the French Revolution? Or is something else—a little more ennobling and spiritually satisfying—at work here? Indicators within the text suggest something more. Note that this unit (19:1-10) is followed by what seems to be the closest description in Revelation of the return of Christ in power (19:11-21). What is striking is that upon his return as King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16), when Christ arrives to vanquish his enemies, there is no description of a battle. Certainly the text gives evidence that the enemies have been routed. In a grisly banquet, instead of men feasting on game, the birds dine on the bodies of the warriors allied with the forces arraigned against the Lamb. But, more importantly, it is as though the real battle took place earlier. In 19:13 the rider on the white horse, **before his coming, is clothed in a robe dipped in blood.** As with the new song, in 5:9 John is saying that the real battle was fought and won at Calvary. Through Calvary the Lamb was given a seat on the throne with the Father. And thus God's ultimate word to this world is not vengeance as an end in itself (Jesus is coming and this time there will be hell to pay); but it is the power of suffering love to reclaim the creation—manifested so dramatically at Calvary. To put it another way, John is saying that—despite all appearances to the contrary—might does not make right—ultimately another kingdom will emerge. And this kingdom will not belong to the idolaters and the practitioners of falsehood (22:15) but, in the words of the Sermon on the Mount, it is the property of the poor in spirit and doers of righteousness. Revelation 19:1-10 is an anticipatory celebration of that moment of victory. As such it is perfectly understandable that John weaves hymnic fragments,

perhaps from acclamations voiced in early Christian assemblies, into a beautiful tapestry honoring the positive answer to the prayers of the martyrs in 6:10-11 for vindication. Yes, all of the effort expended for the cause embodied by the Lamb ultimately will be worthwhile. God's last word is not I will get even, but the divine order of heaven will define the peace and justice of a renewed creation.

Structure of the Text

Now let us look at how John structures his description of this celebration.

The passage seems to fall into four parts. First, in 19:1-3, a heavenly choir sings the praise of God's victory. It constitutes a huge sound of a **great multitude in heaven**. Second, in 19:4, in a sort of antiphonal response, the **twenty-four elders and the four living creatures** make their last narrative appearance in the book. In the presence of God they simply say Amen—Hallelujah. Third, another cry comes from the direction of God's throne. It is praise time. It evokes another antiphonal response of a **great multitude** (19:5-8). Some commentators view the praise in 19:6-8 as an antiphonal response of the faithful on earth to all the heavenly praise in 19:1-5. But the text does not tell us the choir is on earth. Exegetically, I see no reason to view this choir as different from the one in 19:1, although the Greek wording is a little different. In any case, four times the choirs sing Hallelujah (Yahweh saves). With the twentieth century charismatic movement embedded in our consciousness, it comes as something of a surprise to learn that this is the only place in the NT where the word Hallelujah appears. And this is no accident. In rabbinic Judaism (Ber. 9b) there is a saying, "David spoke 103 sections [of the Psalms]; but he only uttered Hallelujah when he saw the fall of the godless." The choirs in Revelation 19 are the answer to God's call to rejoice over the fall of Babylon in 18:20. Biblically speaking, we sing Hallelujah as an anticipatory victory celebration of the coming of the kingdom. God's righteous power will come to pass on earth. It is a way of saying justice will be done. It is a perversion to describe this as a call for vengeance or a form of gloating.

Besides the message of the choirs, the passage has a fourth and final unit. An interpreting angel reminds the reader that faithfulness to the Lamb is a pre-condition to blessedness at the end-time. Overwhelmed, in the presence of the angel, John falls before him in a posture of adoration (19:10). But he is chastened. Veneration of any being besides God and the Lamb is to be rejected. It is their victory and theirs alone. Here and in a similar passage in 22:9 John is told "worship God." And God can only be known through the authoritative testimony of Jesus (1:2) vouched safe in the earthly witness of his incarnation. In a way this word stands as a fitting exclamation to the message of the choirs in praise of the Lamb's victory in the earlier part of the unit.

The Marriage Feast of the Lamb

The most memorable acclamation of the choruses occurs in 19:6b-8. Commentators usually refer to this passage as something like "the invitation to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb." This image in itself could well be the focus point for a sermon.

In keeping with its eschatological focus the initial announcement is that the Lord God Almighty reigns. This particular designation occurs seven times in the book (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22). Whenever something is grouped in seven it has significance in Revelation. Here the formula echoes the OT imagery of Yahweh as Lord of Hosts. John uses it not to make an ontological statement about the nature of God but to stress God's absolute control over history. Interestingly enough the call in 19:7a to rejoice and be glad eschews any reference that the time for the believer to reign on earth has come (5:10). This is strange after the defeat of Babylon in chapter 18. Rather the theme of rejoicing and giving praise functions as the introduction to the announcement that the time for the marriage feast of the Lamb has come. The imagery of Christ the bridegroom betrothed to his church is well known (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:23, 33). This in turn plays on passages in the Gospels where Jesus alludes to the end-time as a wedding feast (Matthew 22:3-14; 26:29); and going back before that there is the expectation of the prophets that the time of messianic salvation can be pictured under the image of a marriage feast (Isaiah 61:10; 62:5). What is striking here is 19:8. Not only has the end-time of salvation come, but we are told the bride is ready. Notice that the readiness of the bride is not something she has achieved, but it is something given (Greek *edothê*). That is, her salvation is given; but note that gift of salvation is for a purpose. To quote Jürgen Roloff, "Everything depends on their keeping it white and pure, that is, on their remaining obedient and not relinquishing the salvation they received."

In short, I would paraphrase 19:8a as:

Salvation is given to the bride in order that she may be clothed in shining pure linen.

Such a conclusion can be shown to pertain to 19:8b, which, as John's explanation of the chorus, can be translated:

That is to say, the linen is the just deeds of the saints.

Commentators often take Revelation 19:8b as a gloss on the text made by a later scribe. But I doubt this very much. For what John is saying is integral to the whole book. That is, the seven churches in various stages of faith, or lack of faith, are being exhorted to remember Jesus' parable on the wedding garment (Matt 22:11-14). Salvation may be by grace, but it should not be treated with complacency. When the last day comes we will be held accountable for our deeds.

The Beatitude of 19:9

This brings us to the last point which we wish to make. Sandwiched between the announcement of the Marriage Feast of the Lamb (19:6-8) and the warning against worship of angels (19:10) is a beatitude. Once again, this is one of a series of seven, and thus, we can infer, has been strategically placed in the text by John. But, for what purpose? Clearly if we look at the beatitudes in Revelation we get a concise answer. The beatitudes are warnings to the readers (originally in the seven churches) that only those who follow the way of Christ faithfully to the end will reap the benefits of blessings in God's new world. In the very first beatitude (1:3) the

reader is told, **“Blessed are those who hear, and keep what is written therein.”** See also the other references 14:13; 16:15; 209:6; 22:7, 14. Notice especially that the last beatitude in 14:13 is preceded by these words, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and faith of Jesus.”

Revelation 19:1-10 must be seen in the context of the full message of Revelation. In the first set of visions in Revelation 1-3, individuals in the churches are warned repeatedly about the dangers of apostasy. In the second set of visions (4:1-22:5), the righteous are said to be sealed by God and they are told collectively that their cause will triumph. Perhaps, as today, there were some in the church complacent about their election. Revelation 19:1-10 anticipates with certainty the triumph of God. But, in no uncertain terms, this text warns individuals in the churches that the danger of apostasy is always at hand. Instead of being clothed in beautiful fine linen at the eschaton one may be wearing the garish clothes of a prostitute (17:4). Given the fate of the woman-prostitute in Revelation, wearing that set of clothes may not be such a good idea. Far better that one can sing the Hallelujah chorus clothed in a fine linen of righteous deeds.

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