

# The Climax of Worship

There is a certain tradition among us that leads us to expect a logical development of a theme, beginning at Genesis and moving on towards Revelation. It is not that Revelation is the only part of scripture that describes the end and goal, but it does present these things in a very dramatic way as well as providing a quite 'logical' conclusion.

The 'story' of Revelation is not so much linear as it is like a vast mural where, at any point, aspects of the reign of Christ are graphically portrayed.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is a development. First there is the doxology which identifies the readers, us, as priests set for service.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup>and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev. 1:5b-6).

Whether we take the words as 'freed us from our sins', which has better manuscript support and does accord with the Exodus imagery expressed in verse 6 (cf. Ex. 19:5-6),<sup>2</sup> or as 'washed us from our sins', which though not as well attested does accord with the picture of Aaron and his sons in Leviticus 6:6-9,

Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward, and washed them with water. <sup>7</sup>He put the tunic on him, fastened the sash around him, clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod on him. He then put the decorated band of the ephod around him, tying the ephod to him with it. <sup>8</sup>He placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim. <sup>9</sup>And he set the turban on his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden ornament, the holy crown, as the LORD commanded Moses.

the high standing of the readers and the speaker cannot be doubted. Neither can the significance of the messages addressed to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. The high priest will have a priesthood with him that is living in the same faithfulness and purity as he, and who treat their calling as brothers (Heb. 2:10-11) of the high priest, sharing in all that he has accomplished, with absolute seriousness.

How they and we come to this high status is seen when John has a vision of the great heavenly throne room. There it all becomes plain, as he sees the worship offered by all creation to the one seated on the throne. Yet the scene is reminiscent of another place of worship, where Israel actually was given 'the worship' in the form of its cultus, with the seven branched lampstand typifying the sevenfold church, and the altar of incense

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Darrell W. Johnson '...in the seven seals we are seeing things from the perspective of the suffering *church*. In the seven trumpets we are seeing things from the perspective of the *world*, as it is being called to repentance. In the seven bowls we are seeing things from the perspective of the temple, from the *throne* of God' (*Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation*, Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, 2004, p. 287, emphasis his).

<sup>2</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* NIGTC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 192. While the two words differ only in the addition of one letter, λύσαντι (*lusanti*) to λούσαντι (*lousanti*), suggesting that a scribal error occurred through the two words being similarly pronounced, a theological motive is still possible. There are other semantic reasons why some prefer λύσαντι; see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, London, 1971, p. 731.

typifying the great effectiveness of prayer and the sweet savor that it is in the nostrils of God. Yet who can bring all this about? Who has the moral worth to accomplish this in such a rebellious creation. Initially none is found and that is a cause of intense distress. Then we, with John are given to see that we are able to be present before the throne because the Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered as the slaughtered Lamb. In a world full of its own pomp and splendor, seeing the Lamb, standing ‘as if it had been slaughtered’, hardly the normal position for such an animal, highlights the paradoxical position of the saints. They refuse to worship the beast (Rev. 13:15), yet all they can offer as an alternative focus of worship is a slaughtered Lamb (Rev. 5:12)! Yet having seen the reality of the heavenly worship, they know that they are now ‘before the throne of God, and [they] worship him day and night within his temple’ and that ‘the one seated on the throne will shelter them’ (Rev. 7:15). So they worship now, with the Lamb, their high priest leading them in the adoration of the one seated on the throne.

If there is a major difficulty, it is that this worship that is offered to the one seated on the throne is violently contested on the earth. The counterfeit trinity with their counterfeit bride appear to wreak havoc on the saints. The whore is intoxicated with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus (Rev. 17:6), while the dragon, the beast and the false prophet combine to wipe the saints from the earth and from before the throne. These three are focused on gaining the worship of every tribe and people and language and nation, so that all the inhabitants of the earth bow before them (Rev. 13:7-8). At the same time, they make war on the saints and conquer them (Rev. 13:7), even denying them access to basic needs of life (Rev. 13:16-17). But most satanic of all, the dragon ‘accuses them day and night before our God’ (Rev. 12:10), with the clear intention of denying the saints their right of access to the throne. Small wonder Paul wrote of the wrestling against principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). But, again, seeing the reality assures us of our right to appear before the throne, since the throne is the place where true righteousness is dispensed; thus the ‘mercy seat’, which the Greek Old Testament called the ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*, Ex. 25:17), where the righteous wrath was satisfied, in the tabernacle. So if the Lamb stands before the throne as slaughtered, he stands as a continuous testimony to the fact that the wrath has been fully expended on the Lamb (cf. Rom. 5:9).<sup>3</sup> Neither the outworking nor the climax of that wrath on the evil which remains within the creation need cause the saints any fear, even though they may well suffer throughout the process.

## THE OUTWORKING OF THE WRATH

Twice, at Revelation 1:1 and then at 22:6, there is the phrase ‘what must soon take place’. These two uses function as some sort of ‘inclusio’ to all that lies between, like bookends. The same applies with the phrase ‘the time is near’ at Revelation 1:3 and 22:10. To those who are finding the battle almost overwhelming these come as a strong reminder that all

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<sup>3</sup> Paul’s statement is eschatological. *Having been* justified by Christ’s blood, and we *will be* saved by him from the wrath (the addition of ‘of God’ after ‘wrath’ in most translations is not supported by the Greek). Compare also the use of the future tenses in Rom. 5:17, ‘will exercise dominion’ and Rev. 5:10, ‘will reign on earth’.

things are moving towards a climax. Therefore the exhortations of Revelation 13:10 and 14:6, to endurance and faith, are made with this sense of urgency.

The pain within the process is real, but the process itself is seen differently when the throne is understood, and when the Lamb is seen breaking the seals on the scroll in Revelation 6:1-17 and 8:1-5 and when the angels blowing the seven trumpets are seen in 8:6 – 11:19. We are given to see that, while Christians do indeed suffer for their faith, unbelievers suffer for their lack of it. It has been suggested<sup>4</sup> that the four horsemen of the apocalypse with their judgments may represent what has been known in history ever since the exclusion of the primal couple from Eden. They represent not only the horsemen in Zechariah 6, but the curse upon creation because of human sin. However, the effects of the trumpets being blown is judgment with a greater purpose. The intense pain is to leave sinful men and women, who do not repent, without any sense of genuine hope (Rev. 9:20-21). Of course there is bitterness for believers, but it is the bitterness, not of God's wrath, but of his prophetic word being violently rejected (Rev. 10:8-11; 11:7-10). It is the bitterness for the saints who are so viciously hated and attacked by the dragon and his two beasts (Rev. 12-13).

The security of the saints remains undoubted. It goes without saying that the beast would mark his own (Rev. 13:16ff.), but that is because God has ensured that the curse of creation does not touch *his* own, by them being marked on the forehead (Rev. 7:3-8) with the name of the Lamb and the name of his Father (Rev. 14:1). In the midst of this suffering, this great throng sings the new song, as they really do stand before the throne. And they alone know this new song, because it is given to them as the redeemed (Rev. 14:3; cf. Ps. 40:1-3).

...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! <sup>4</sup>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. 15:3-4).

God's judgments, his righteous acts,<sup>5</sup> have been revealed. These judgments that have come are not capricious reactions but are the deliberate and just actions of holiness against evil, human and satanic. God's actions against evil are evidence that the climax is coming quickly.

## THE CLIMAX OF THE WRATH

The restraint of evil is a factor in life which only the redeemed can recognise through a revelation of Jesus Christ (2 Thess. 2:6). *He* is the one who is bringing all things to their goal, because he himself *is* the goal, the τέλος (*telos*).<sup>6</sup> All things will, and can only be, summed up in him (Eph. 1:10). So then, the seven angels with the seven plagues will bring the wrath of God to its goal (Rev. 15:1). With the pouring of the seven bowls there

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<sup>4</sup> My reflection on a comment by Bill Dumbrell, in a conversation, 6th June 2006.

<sup>5</sup> τα δικαιώματά σου (*ta dikaiōmata sou*)

<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion of this term in relation to Jesus, see Adrio König, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1999.

is no possibility of repentance: God is now ‘cleaning up’ creation so that his great climax can be accomplished.

The similarity between the various plagues and the plagues on Egypt can hardly be overlooked. Those earlier judgments were part of the liberation of the chosen people so that they might leave Egypt and worship:

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. <sup>23</sup>I said to you, “Let my son go that he may worship me.” But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.’ (Ex. 4:22-23)

The similarity between Pharaoh’s empty attempt to keep his captives and the proposed battle at Harmagedon (Rev. 16:16) should also not be missed. Whatever threats may appear, there is simply no battle! The seventh plague overwhelms and destroys the enemy (Rev. 16:17-20). The same picture is presented in Revelation 19:11-21. The Word of God, the ‘King of kings and Lord of lords’ has a sword coming out of his mouth by which to strike down the nations, so when he rides in on his white horse, blood spattered, from a previous battle, with ‘the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure’ with him, the angel simply calls the birds of the air to come to feast on the corpses at ‘the great supper of God’. Even before they gather against the Lord and his anointed, the enemies’ doom is sealed. The Word of God triumphs (cf. Acts 19:20).

The first to be exposed as false and doomed is the counterfeit bride. From Revelation 17:1 to 19:3 there is the vivid description of the fall of ‘Babylon the great’ (cf. Isa. 21:9). The utter ugliness of this ‘woman’ and the vast scope of the corruption associated with her would almost overwhelm us were we not to see that ‘in one hour’ she is gone (Rev. 18:10). Small wonder that the apostle Paul warned the Corinthians:

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? <sup>15</sup>What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup>What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>17</sup>Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, <sup>18</sup>and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” <sup>1</sup>Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God. (2 Cor 6:14–7:1)

In strong contrast is the worship of the elders and the rest of creation, all in their representatives, in Revelation 4:4-9.

And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!” <sup>5</sup>And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.” <sup>6</sup>Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. <sup>7</sup>Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; <sup>8</sup>to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

What could be more beautiful, uncomplicated and pure, than the bride of Christ fully occupied with the ‘good works of the new creation’ (Eph. 2:10)? And what could be sweeter than the blessing of being ‘invited’, literally ‘called’<sup>7</sup> to the marriage supper of the Lamb? This ‘calling’ does not mean called to be a guest of, but called to *be*, the bride!

But what of the enemy? Revelation 12, which has been called “the central axis” ... the theological centre of the book,<sup>8</sup> sets out the picture of a great battle which took place in the heavenly places: it was a battle between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels. Michael, the archangel (Jude 9), the ‘great prince, the protector of [Israel]’ (Dan. 12:1), and his forces defeated the dragon, whose creaturely status was definitively established (Rev. 12:7-9). But the nature of the defeat was spelled out in the description of the dragon in Revelation 12:10. He is ‘the accuser of the brethren ... who accuses them day and night before our God’. And there was no longer any place for him in heaven because there was no longer any basis for accusation! Indeed, the brethren ‘have overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony’ (Rev. 12:11).

The present vicious activity of Satan can only be understood, from that vantage point, of him being totally bound — in a bottomless pit — but being permitted, for the present, to exercise some carefully limited action (Rev. 20:1-6).<sup>9</sup> Beyond that limited scope, there awaits only the total removal of those who would threaten the saints, again without any battle being required, since fire comes down from heaven and consumes them (Rev. 20:9) and also there is the climactic and eternal judgment of Satan and his beast and false prophet (Rev. 20:10).

With that decisive action, the truth of the saints is now made plain. Whereas they had appeared as defeated and broken, now their true identity, established at the cross, is revealed (cf. Rev. 3:9). Their names were written in the book of life (Rev. 20:15), which was earlier defined as being the book of life of the Lamb who was slain (Rev. 13:8). All else, the old creation and those whose names were not written in that book, was completely removed, along with ‘the last enemy’ (1 Cor. 15:26) itself.

## OVERWHELMING WORSHIP

Having seen that the earth and heaven fled from the presence of the one on the throne (Rev. 20:11), John now sees the *new* heavens and new earth so long anticipated (in Isaiah 65:17-25 etc.) and says that the sea was no more. The whole people, the priestly community from every tribe, language, people and nation, are now shown in their free access to the throne. Accusations which would attempt to deny them that right are now totally gone: ‘*All* is so pure and *all* is so plain!’<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> κεκλημένοι (*keklēmenoi*)

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, the ‘millennium’. The questions of *when* the millennium will occur, or *for how long* it will last, are probably not appropriate. The question would be better put as ‘what does the millennium signify?’ On this, see Ian Pennicook, *Maranatha*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1998, p. 129ff.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, ‘Nothing between us’, *New Creation Hymn Book*, N° 261.

Until this is finally revealed, all that we have had is the ‘type’, the symbol that well, but incompletely, represented the ‘antitype’. The antitype is the great reality which Moses saw on the mountain and the type is the representation of that for Israel, with its tabernacle and temple and associated cultus, the ceremonial structures of ‘the worship’ (Rom. 9:4).

Because John uses the language of the type, the assumption has been made that the church is ‘the new Israel’. I would want to doubt that. Israel itself, as the kingdom of priests, was only ever a type of something far grander and far richer. I suggest that until Acts 8 or perhaps Acts 10, the church was indeed the new Israel, or, better, the new Israel was the church, since there was only a Jewish church. But the Old Testament should have left them in no doubt that from the new Israel would come that which the old Israel ought to have brought about, namely, the redemption of *all* the nations, with Israel as a constituent and highly blessed participant (see Isa. 2:2-4; 19:24-25).<sup>11</sup>

The language used in Revelation 21-22 is plainly drawn from the Old Testament, and equally plainly is based on the typological language of Israel. But we should not stop there, since Israel’s self-consciousness was in terms of God’s purposes for the whole creation.<sup>12</sup> Hence there is a new heavens and a new earth, with a multi-ethnic bride (most specifically not a multi-cultural bride!) prepared for the Lamb.<sup>13</sup> All that Israel anticipated by its concern for the land is now fulfilled in the whole of creation. So finally, the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14).

There is only one place from which to adequately see the bride of Christ, and that is from ‘a great, high mountain’ (Ps. 48:1-2), the ‘idealised’ location of the sanctuary.<sup>14</sup> From that vantage point, everything becomes clear, as in Psalm 73:16-17.

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,<sup>17</sup> until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.

The bride is the city (cf. Heb. 12:22-24), described in ways that fulfil the promises of Ezekiel 40-48. But there is no temple there, meaning that there is no building to which one would go to worship since the temple, the sanctuary, the holy place, the *ναός* (*naos*, as distinct from the *ἱερόν*, *hieron*, which included the whole precincts), is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (Rev. 21:22). There is no need of a building because God is there and all may freely approach him. Revelation 21:23 adds that ‘the city has no need

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<sup>11</sup> Many of the problems faced by the New Testament church arose when Jewish, or ‘Jewishly’ inclined, Christians wanted to insist that non-Jewish believers find their identity in Christ through Israel, a point which the apostle Paul consistently rejected.

<sup>12</sup> See William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21-22 and the Old Testament*, Lancer, Homebush West, 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Revelation 21:3 has a hint of this, though the manuscript evidence is divided. Did John write, ‘they will be his people’ or ‘peoples’? Of the translations to which I have access, only the *NRSV* and *ASV* have the plural, though see the discussion in Metzger, *A Textual Commentary*, p. 765. *UBS*<sup>1</sup>, *UBS*<sup>3</sup> and *UBS*<sup>4</sup> prefer the plural. Robert Bratcher, *A Translator’s Guide to the Revelation to John* United Bible Societies, London, 1984m, p. 174, urges: ‘It would seem that the original text was the plural “his peoples,” and a translation should follow that text’. Given the textual uncertainty, the choice will depend on a *theological* evaluation of the progress within the Scriptures.

<sup>14</sup> See William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1994, p. 81ff.

of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb'. Is this reflecting the initial days of the first creation, before the presence of sun or moon and stars? It certainly reflects the language of Ezekiel 43:2, 5 and Isaiah 60:19.

Then there are the nations. Just as God made from one all the nations, with a view to them searching for him and perhaps finding him (Acts 17:26-7), he promised Abraham that he would bless the nations through him, a promise partially fulfilled in 1 Kings 10 when the Queen of Sheba not only saw Solomon's greatness but honoured Solomon's God and brought great treasure to the king —

“Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king to execute justice and righteousness.”<sup>10</sup> Then she gave the king one hundred twenty talents of gold, a great quantity of spices, and precious stones; never again did spices come in such quantity as that which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. (1 Kings 10:9-10)

Later we read:

The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. <sup>25</sup>Every one of them brought a present, objects of silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. (1 Kings 10:24-25)

So in the new heavens and earth the nations are all there in the holy city, and their kings bring their glory into it (Rev. 21:24). The nations are restored in this city because through the city flows the great river of God and access to the tree of life has been restored: the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2).

Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; <sup>4</sup>they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. <sup>5</sup>And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 22:3-5)

Mere theological precision can never satisfy as this vision does. Here is worship, sweet, adoring, without hindrance or memory to accuse. Here are the pure in heart, seeing God. Here is all that the community that now worships longs for, yet which by faith it knows! Were it not to know it now, this picture would be pointless.

We are the holy, priestly community. We are those who now have access to the throne of God because of Christ, our great high priest. Whatever limitations there may be to our ability to *see* the wonders of all this, faith knows the substance of the things hoped for, indeed faith is itself the evidence of things not seen. What we do have is the precious and very great promises, by which we escape the corruption of the world's lusts and perverse passions and share in the divine nature. And the promise is:

See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book (Rev. 22:7)

to which the saints reply:

Amen. Come Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:20)

So how, now, do we live? In the midst of a world that moves inexorably to the final judgment,

Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." (Rev. 22:11)

Let the priestly community still *be* the priestly community!