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Triumph and delay: the interpretation of Revelation 19:11–20:10

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One of the tasks of the commentator on sacred Scripture is to provide the reader with an outline of the structure of the work under consideration. Accordingly, every commentary on Revelation includes some such outline within its introductory pages. However, a glance at two or more outlines reveals that this can be a fairly subjective procedure. The ancient writer left no markers to indicate how he intended his work to be subdivided, and different commentators divide the text up differently, often changing thereby the significance that may be given to a particular section.

The Book of Revelation lends itself to being divided into sections – seven letters, seven seals, seven trumpets and so on. Some major divisions of the text would be agreed by all. The letters to the churches, for example, form a discrete section, and every commentator sees a break between the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4. Other divisions are less clear, although no one doubts their existence. Does 11:19 conclude the Trumpet section of the book or introduce the section that follows, a series of visions featuring the age-long battle of the Dragon and his agents, the Beasts, with the Lamb and his army of martyrs who follow him wherever he goes? In this case it makes little difference, since the existence of two distinct sections is undoubted, even if we cannot exactly agree where to put the marker, but other proposed breaks may be more significant. In particular nearly every commentary puts a break at 19:10 and sees a new section beginning at 19:11, and it is this that I want to question.

I. Triumph

In the passage that forms the second half of our chapter 19 John has a vision of a majestic figure seated on a white horse. He is crowned with many crowns, he is wearing a robe dipped in blood, and out of his mouth comes a sharp sword. He is variously called 'Faithful and True', 'the Word of God' and 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords'. John then sees an angel, who invites the birds of the air to feast on the flesh of those who have been slain while fighting for the beast. Finally he sees the beast and the false prophet (whom we know to be the second beast of chapter 13, the beast from the land, comparing 19:20 with 13:11–17) captured and thrown into the lake of fire.

According to a widespread consensus among scholars, this passage describes the Parousia, or Second Coming of Christ and a final battle in which the forces that have opposed God's rule are destroyed. Pre-millennialists see this as prior to a thousand-year period in which Christ and his saints rule on earth; a-millennialists argue that the thousand years refers to the time between the Advents and so prior to the last battle, but most agree that 19:11-21 describes the Parousia, in which Christ descends to destroy his enemies. Beasley-Murray speaks of 'the Lord sweeping down at the head of the armies of heaven.'¹ Sweet² and Witherington³ agree. Caird⁴ does not actually speak of the Parousia, but he certainly sees the passage as describing a battle in which the destroyers are destroyed. Beale speaks of 'Christ's defeat and judgment of the ungodly forces at the end of history.'⁵ McKelvey denies that this should be seen as the Second Coming, but can still speak of Christ coming with the armies of heaven to destroy evil.⁶ Aune, while noting that many traditional features of the Parousia are missing, nevertheless understands this vision to be describing that event and as such to start a new section of Revelation, which he entitles 'The final defeat of God's remaining foes.'⁷

There are several problems with this view. In the first place, there is nothing that explicitly identifies this vision with the Second Coming. As McKelvey points out, the traditional imagery for describing that event, Christ coming with the clouds, is missing, even though from 1:7 we know that the author is familiar with it.⁸ More generally, we may wonder whether the attempt to identify John's vision with a future event awaited by Christian believers on the basis of other biblical texts is not misplaced. All we know for certain is that John saw the rider on the white horse moving across the stage of his vision, not that any such event is destined to occur in our world, let alone that it is that particular event.

Second, there are problems with the whole idea that this passage is describing a last battle. For as several commentators admit there is no battle! Beasley-Murray says, 'There is no battle... the battle resolves itself into a judgement by the Word of God.'⁹ Witherington says, 'The battle of Armageddon proves to be a one-sided affair... Though the armies had assembled for battle, it turned out to be an execution.'¹⁰ With this curious fact may be linked several other anomalies.

1 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (NCB) (London: Marshall, 1974), 278.

2 J. Sweet, *Revelation* (TPI) (London: SCM, 1979), 281.

3 B. Witherington III, *Revelation* (NCBC) (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 241.

4 G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St John the Divine* (BNTC) (London: Black, 1966), 239ff.

5 G. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 948.

6 R. J. McKelvey, *The Millennium and the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1999), 77-80.

7 D. E. Aune, *Revelation* (WBC) (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 1040ff.

8 McKelvey, 78. Aune says the identification is 'problematic' (1046), though he accepts it as 'probably correct' (1053).

9 Beasley-Murray, 278.

10 Witherington, 244.

Why is the rider's robe bloody before the 'battle' has even begun? The commentators have various explanations. According to Caird the blood is the blood of the martyrs.¹¹ Beasley-Murray says it is the blood of his enemies, but that his robe is stained before the battle begins because 'it indicates his function as executor of divine wrath.'¹² Sweet thinks the blood is his own blood.¹³ The fact that the rider is said to be the one who treads the winepress of the wrath of God (v.15, cf. Is. 63:1) gives the idea that it is the blood of his enemies a certain plausibility, but surely there is a simpler explanation for its presence here? Then there is the matter of the armies of heaven being dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Caird, for whom the army is the army of martyrs, says they are dressed in the garments of victors.¹⁴ Beasley-Murray thinks they are angels, but notes that they are dressed not for battle but for a wedding.¹⁵ Witherington thinks they might be either but agrees that the garments are ceremonial because the army does no fighting.¹⁶ But what kind of a battle is it in which the army comes dressed for a wedding or other celebration and is not expected to fight?

Third, the idea that this passage describes the Parousia and a final battle against the forces of evil causes severe problems for interpreting the subsequent passage in which Satan is bound to prevent him from deceiving the nations for a thousand years, after which they are again deceived and defeated in (another?) last battle. These problems have often been noted, as by McKelvey, whose solution, in common with other scholars, is to say that John has employed the technique of 'recapitulation' so as to describe the same thing twice.¹⁷ With White¹⁸ and Beasley-Murray¹⁹ he notes that John has employed this technique before in that each of his septets, the seals, the trumpets and the bowls, ends with a depiction of the last judgement. Accordingly, 20:7-10 and 19:11-21 feature the same last battle, not two different battles. But this is a far from straightforward reading of the text, and if that is what John meant one might have expected him to make this clearer.²⁰

It will be seen that the root of all these problems is the commentators' decision to divide chapter 19 in such a way that a major new section of Revelation is seen to begin at 19:11 with a description of the Second Coming and a battle that is no battle. There is no necessity to do so. The words *καὶ ἔϊδον* with which the paragraph begins occur very frequently in Revelation (thirty-one times in all and

11 Caird, 243.

12 Beasley-Murray, 280.

13 Sweet, 283.

14 Caird, 244.

15 Beasley-Murray, 281.

16 Witherington, 243.

17 McKelvey, 'The Millennium and the Second Coming', *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. S. Moyise (Edinburgh: Clark, 2001), 85-100.

18 R. F. White, 'Re-examining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1-10', *WTJ* 51 (1989) 319-44.

19 Beasley-Murray, 30-31.

20 M. Gilbertson, *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Cambridge: Grove, 1997), 11.

eight times in chapters 19-21) and hardly prove that a new section is in mind. They could just as well link what John saw to what he has earlier described as signal a whole new sequence of visions. The desire to start a new section here stems from the belief that the Parousia is in view, but if the passage does not in fact describe the Parousia, then the relationship of that event to the Millennium ceases to be an issue. If it does not describe the Last Battle, then the continuing presence of the nations and the occurrence of another 'last battle' pose no problems. Accordingly, I wish to propose that the second half of chapter 19 be read as a continuation of the celebrations over the fall of Babylon that began in the first half, and that the reason that no battle is described is that the battle is already over. The key to this interpretation is to recognise that in vv.11-16 John is describing a victory parade, drawing on the imagery of a Roman triumph.

The only commentator to my knowledge to recognise the Roman triumph as a source of the imagery employed in 19:11-16 is Aune,²¹ but although he lists several points of similarity between the triumph and the appearance of the divine warrior in Revelation, he does nothing with this insight and does not allow it to affect his interpretation of the passage, which he thinks is still 'probably' a depiction of the Parousia in which Christ rides out to fight a battle. The Roman triumph consisted of a victory parade through the city granted by the Senate for the purpose of honouring a victorious general and his army. One such event that would have been well known to John and his readers was the triumph granted to Vespasian and Titus following their victory over the Jews in 70 AD. It is described in some detail by Josephus.²² Given the way in which Revelation critiques Roman power and satirises the emperor's claims to lordship and divinity²³ it is entirely likely that John would use and subvert the image of the triumph in presenting the quite different victory of Christ.

Two short extracts from H.S.Versnel's study of the Roman triumph will serve to bring out the similarity.²⁴

The *triumphator*

The victorious general whom the senate had granted the right to a triumph, entered Rome standing on a high two-wheeled chariot, the *currus triumphalis*, which was drawn by four horses... The triumphator is clothed in the *vestis triumphalis*: the *tunica palmata* – thus called after the palm branches embroidered on it – and the *toga picta*, a name it owed to its rich embroidery, according to Appian in the form of gold stars. Both garments were purple, and there is reason to suppose that originally the toga was purple all over and that the gold-coloured ornaments were a later addi-

21 Aune, 1050-52.

22 Bf7.5.3-6.

23 R. J. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 34-39.

24 H. S. Versnel. *Triumphus: an Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

tion. On his head the triumphator, and his military suite, wore the *corona laurea*, the symbol of triumph, and for this reason often called the *corona triumphalis*... In his right hand the triumphator carries a laurel branch, in his left an ivory sceptre surmounted by an eagle: in addition he wore the *bulia*, whilst his face was, in ancient times at any rate, red-leaded.²⁵

The *pompa triumphalis*

The part of the procession which entered the city ahead of the triumphator's chariot gave the spectators an idea of the victory. Not only were the spoils of war carried along – weapons, gold, silver and jewellery – but also pictures of battle-scenes, of towns conquered, and boards with the names of the peoples subjugated... The procession marched to a flourish of trumpets... Aromatic substances were also carried. The chained prisoners, the most prominent of whom were as a rule killed in the dungeon before the sacrifice was made to Jupiter, walked right in front of the *currus triumphalis*. The triumphator was preceded by the lictors in red war dress with laureate *fasces*. The magistrates and the senate also walked ahead of the chariot with the triumphator and his small children. Older boys accompanied the triumphator on horseback, as did his officers. The chariot was followed by the Romans who had been liberated from slavery, wearing the *pileus* of the *liberti*.²⁶

In the same way Revelation depicts a procession led by a figure on a white horse, the symbol of victory, followed by his victorious, white-clad, soldiers, also riding white horses. The fact that he is mounted and not in a chariot serves to bring out his oneness with those who, like him, have borne faithful witness. All are riding white horses. The rider is already crowned, as a *triumphator* should be.²⁷ Like his Roman counterpart John's rider is dressed in a purple robe, but with the significant difference that the rider's robe owes its colour to its having been dipped in blood. Opinions differ as to whether this is the blood of his enemies or his own blood (Aune makes the interesting suggestion that this shows Christ's procession to be posthumous, as some Roman triumphs apparently were), but either way we should not miss the obvious point that if the rider's robe is dipped in blood it is because the battle is already over. His robe, suitably decorated, further declares him to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The chapter as a whole, I suggest, should be read as the conclusion to the section of Revelation that began at 15:5, depicting the fall of Babylon. That event was announced by an angel in 14:8 and is described under the figure of seven bowls of the wrath of God poured out on Babylon, signifying her total destruction (16:1-21). In chapter 17 Babylon is clearly identified with the city of Rome

25 Versnel, *Triumphus*, 56-7.

26 Versnel, *Triumphus*, 95.

27 Josephus tells us that for their triumph Vespasian and Titus came out crowned with laurel and clothed in purple habits (BJ 7.5.4).

and shown to be not only a savage monster but also a seductive prostitute drawing people away from the living God, and the collapse of her empire is again foretold (17:16). The fall of Babylon is celebrated first by a lament (18:1-24) and then in chapter 19 by a joyful victory parade. First John hears the jubilant crowd celebrating the victory of the Lamb (19:1-8). Then the conqueror himself comes into view at the head of his victorious army. As we have seen, he is crowned already, because the battle is over, so he cannot possibly be riding out to war. His white robe likewise bears the marks of battles already fought and won. The birds of the air that are summoned by the angel to eat the flesh of the defeated armies, while offensive to modern sensibilities, were a common sight on any ancient battle-field on the day after the battle. Finally, as with a Roman triumph, we see the defeated enemy paraded behind the victor, and the scene ends as Roman triumphs did with the execution of the most prominent captives.²⁸ The kings of the earth do not then and there confront the rider and his army. Rather, they are paraded before John's gaze as those who *had been* gathered together (συνηγμένα) to make war against the rider on the horse and his army and are now defeated. Similarly, the beast and the false prophet have been made prisoners already (ἐπιόσθη) and are now taken away for execution. That is why the great battle is no battle, because it has already taken place and this is the victory parade with its grisly aftermath. In this way the whole of what is now chapter 19 should be seen as a single narrative completing the picture of the triumph of the Lamb over the beast, and answering the question, By whom has Babylon been destroyed? So understood it prompts the obvious question, What happens next?

II. Delay

What happens next in John's vision is a period of a thousand years during which Satan is bound and the martyrs reign with Christ. How should this be understood and what message did John intend to convey to the churches thereby? Discussion of the millennium has been distorted by the belief that the immediately preceding paragraphs contain a representation of the Second Coming. This has led to a debate over whether the millennial reign is thought of as taking place before or after that event, but if 19:11-21 do not describe the final coming of Christ, but rather celebrate the fall of Babylon and declare who it is that has brought about her overthrow, then to discuss the millennium in terms of 'pre-, post-, or a-millennialism' may be to miss the point. Pre-millennialism in particular loses its exegetical basis, if the Parousia is not in fact portrayed in the second half of chapter 19.

The more important division of opinion regarding the millennium is between those who think that John is predicting a literal period of time in the future history of our world (not necessarily exactly a thousand years) during which time the

28 Josephus says that Vespasian and Titus's triumph ended with the execution of the enemy general, Simon son of Gioras (BJ 7.5.6).

earth will enjoy paradisiacal conditions under the rule of Christ and his saints (for example Witherington), and those who see it as a symbol for something else, either the period between the two Advents (Augustine and, among recent commentators, Beale), or the vindication of the martyrs (Bauckham and McKelvey).

There are excellent reasons for rejecting a literal approach. As Bauckham says:

Once we take the image literally – as predicting an actual period in the future history of the world – it is impossible to limit it to this function... We have to ask: whom do the saints rule? Do they rule from heaven or on earth? How is the eschatological life of resurrection compatible with an unrenewed earth? Who are the nations Satan deceives at the end of the millennium? And so on.²⁹

We could easily add others. For instance, can spiritual beings, such as we suppose Satan to be, be seized, chained and thrown into pits? Witherington talks about Satan being ‘put into a holding tank’.³⁰ What is the reality of this? If Christ can overcome Satan by force (as opposed to by his death on the cross, 12:10), why does he wait until the millennium to do so, and having done so, why does he let him out again? What do we mean by Christ ‘ruling’ anyway? John speaks of Christ and his saints reigning, but reigning is not at all the same as ruling. Reigning means being recognised as king, as Christ has been following his death and resurrection. Ruling means exercising authority so as to regulate the affairs of some part of the world. If we think that at some stage Christ will rule on this earth as we know it, we would have to ask: Where will he be located? How will he make his will known throughout the world? (Witherington actually speaks of Christ enlisting the risen saints to aid him. Aid him how? As District Officers of some imagined heavenly empire?) How will Christ enforce his will if and when people are not inclined to obey it (which is what ruling means)? Clearly Christ is not now ruling the world in that sense, though as the Risen One he is certainly reigning. Can we believe that he will ever do so except in a new creation consisting of a new heaven and new earth? But that is the subject of chapters 21 and 22, not of this passage.

So in my judgement Bauckham’s approach is much to be preferred. The millennium is a symbol, but a symbol of what? Bauckham followed by McKelvey sees it simply as a symbol of the vindication of the martyrs,³¹ but is that all it is, effectively a promise conveyed to John in visionary form that God will vindicate his faithful servants by raising them from the dead? What about the binding of Satan, which seems to be strangely missing from Bauckham’s account? The thousand years are just as explicitly linked with this as with the reign of the martyrs. I suggest that the millennium is *a symbol of delay*. Following the fall of Babylon described and celebrated from 15:5–19:21, the reader naturally asks,

29 Bauckham, *Theology*, 108.

30 Witherington, 204.

31 Bauckham, *Theology*, 106–8, McKelvey, *Millennium*, 81–84.

What next? Will God's kingdom now come in its fullness? Can we expect to see the bride coming to meet her bridegroom, as the enthusiastic cries of the celebrating crowds might lead us to suppose (19:7)? John's answer is Not Yet. There is work to be done if God's city is to be peopled with all for whom Christ died. The nations must be undeceived so that they can bring their glory into the city of God. For this purpose God needs his church to remain on earth, and her labours will not be in vain, since Satan is now bound. This does not mean that all evil and suffering are to be absent from the world, but that Satan's lies will no longer prove to be persuasive. Satan, we recall, is the accuser (12:10), whose deception consists of propagating a false view of God as a tyrant, a stranger to mercy, determined to exact payment to the last drop of blood. As Caird put it:

He is a martinet, who demands that men shall be dealt with according to the rigour of the law, and will go to any lengths to secure a verdict. His tragedy consists precisely in this, that law is not the ultimate truth about God, so that, in defending the honour of God's law, Satan becomes the enemy of God's true purpose.³²

It is this that the cross and resurrection have shown to be false, and it is by the cross and resurrection that Satan has been disempowered, thrown out of the heavenly courtroom in one image, confined to a pit in another. The thousand years' delay is an age of grace to allow for the conversion of the nations (which Bauckham has shown to be an important theme in the whole of Revelation³³).

But if the new creation is still a thousand years away, what of those who die in the meantime, especially those who lose their lives as a result of their witness for Christ and resistance to the beast? John's answer in brief is that they are quite safe, since they live and reign with Christ in heaven until such time as God brings in the new creation, when they will be raised to reign on the renewed earth. In support of this interpretation the following points may be made.

1. They are described as 'souls' (ψυχαί), which seems clearly to suggest that they are disembodied.³⁴
2. Condemned by human judges they are vindicated by God. Although the English translations say that they 'had been given authority to judge' (NIV), the most natural way of understanding κρίμα ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς is that judgement was passed in their favour (as in Dan. 7:22).³⁵
3. Though they have been killed for their witness they are said to live (εἶησαν). Their going to be with Christ is described paradoxically as a first resurrection, in fulfilment of Jesus' promise to the believer: 'though he die yet shall he live.' (John 11:25)
4. They are said to sit on thrones and to reign with Christ, in fulfilment of Jesus' promise to the faithful in Laodicea (3:21). Until his Parousia Christ

32 G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford: OUP, 1956) 37.

33 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1993), 238-337.

34 Beale, 998.

35 Beale, 997.

reigns invisibly, that is, in heaven, and this goes for them too. This passage closely parallels two other visions in Revelation, that of the souls under the altar who are told that they must wait for their visible vindication until the number of God's elect is complete (6:9-11), and that of the victorious saints who sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:2-3). In both these visions the saints are in heaven.³⁶

5. Finally they are said to be priests of God and of Christ, but if this means that they exercise a ministry of intercession, then this, like Christ's, is surely to be located in heaven, as Christ's is (Rom. 8:34, Heb. 7:25) and not (*pace* McKelvey³⁷) on earth. Numerous writers have seen the millennium as expressing God's commitment to bring his kingdom on earth,³⁸ but this concern is adequately addressed by the descent to earth of the New Jerusalem, so that Bauckham is surely right to ask: 'What function does the millennium fulfil which the new creation cannot?'³⁹ There is in fact nothing in the present passage to suggest that the saints live and reign on earth during the millennium. Although the heavenly host praising the Lamb declares that the redeemed will reign on the earth (5:10), this surely has in view the completion of all God's work of salvation, something that finds its fulfilment in the new creation (22:5). There is nothing to link this verse with the thousand years during which the saints reign with Christ, where he sits at the right hand of God, and wait for their second, physical, resurrection.

The contention of this article is that it is connecting it with the Parousia that has clouded the discussion of the millennium. Either we have understood the millennium to be a period of this world's history subsequent to the Second Coming, with all the difficulties of envisaging such a thing, which I have outlined, or we have supposed that John first describes the Second Coming and then, with no clear indication that that is what he is doing, follows it with a description of the present age that precedes that event. But if chapter 19 is not intended as a description of the Parousia at all, but is rather a victory parade in which the fall of Babylon is celebrated, the millennium is set free to fulfil its true function, which is to warn the readers of an indefinite delay during which the nations are to be set free from deception and gathered into God's city. As they wait for this they are to know that those who live and die in the faith of Christ, of whom the martyrs are the most conspicuous but not necessarily the only exemplars, are safe in God's keeping, living and reigning with Christ, until the new creation comes. In reaching this conclusion we arrive at an interpretation of the millennium that is symbolic rather than literal, a-millennial rather than pre-millennial, but the term 'a-millennial' is a misnomer. In understanding the millennium as a gra-

36 M. Gorges, 'The Thousand Year Reign: Terrestrial or Celestial?', *CBQ* 47 (1985), 679-80

37 McKelvey, *Millennium*, 83.

38 See Gilbertson, *Meaning*, 31 and the literature cited there.

39 Bauckham, *God will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1999), 135-6.

cious delay we are not so much presenting an a-millennial view of the future as an 'a-parousial' view of the millennium!

Abstract

The vision of Christ riding at the head of his armies (Rev. 19:11-21) has commonly been understood to depict the Second Coming and to mark the start of a new section of Revelation that goes on to describe the Millennium and final judgement. This article argues that by using the imagery of a Roman triumph the vision depicts not the Second Coming but the victory of Christ over Babylon. As such it is to be seen as the climax of the preceding vision and not as the start of a new section. This opens the way to seeing the Millennium not as the sequel to the Parousia but as a symbol for the delay that Christians must expect before God's kingdom comes in its fullness. During this time the nations are won for Christ and the Church triumphs through its sufferings.

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