

EXCERPTS FROM THE REVELATION
Part II – Comments from Chapters 10, 19

Chapter ten is far from the most important place (or message) in the Book of Revelation. But it is a good illustration of how John's mind works, and of how he is trying to proclaim the Message of the Christian Faith. Chapter ten also has the advantage of being one of the shorter chapters in the book. That means I can read the whole chapter out loud to you in just a couple of minutes. Actually, it's always a very good idea to read Revelation out loud, even if you are all by yourself. It is one of the rare books that will come clearer faster if you read it that way.

[Read Revelation 10]

Having heard the chapter, imagine yourself sitting in a group of eight or twelve friends in a Disciple Band, and you have just finished reading this chapter together. What do you make of it?

I can tell you what usually happens in the real situation. People say: "It seems very confusing to me." "I don't get what this has to do with anything that matters to us." "It's just more symbols from some time we can no longer understand." And so on.

"Well, okay. We can move on in a minute if you like. But first let's at least give it a shot." So we start with verse 1. A strong angel. (Are there weak angels?) An angel is a "messenger" (by definition). This one is coming down from heaven, so the message is straight from heaven. Must be pretty important. Maybe we don't want to be too hasty about moving on without "getting the message."

Clothed with a cloud, face like the sun, feet like pillars of fire – we get a very impressive scene of might and power and awesomeness. But we get a lot more than that if we read our Bibles very much. *"And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night; the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people."* (Exodus 13:21-22)

Does it cross John's mind that we would be so busy watching movies and playing golf that we would not know the story of Moses?

That we would not realize how clearly he is introducing this scene and announcing what he is about to talk about? And what about the rainbow upon the angel's head? What is a rainbow, in our tradition? (John is always coming from our tradition – from Scripture – however “new” he sometimes tells the message.) (Genesis 9:8-17) So at least we know we are in the setting of Moses in the wilderness, and now we can add to that: This is about the Covenant. The rainbow is symbol of God's Covenant. Wilderness plus Covenant ... “Oh, now I remember!” The Holy Mountain, the Decalogue, Torah (Ten Commandments and all that stuff). So is John really being obtuse, or are we just being dense?

Does this interpretation match the passage? John's language does everything to honor (not minimize) this message, this little scroll. It does indeed contain the “truth” – the purpose of God. John starts to write it down, but there is no need. This is not the scroll that was sealed and for which we couldn't find anyone worthy to open it. This book is open. It is already known – it has already been written. (And the prophets have been trying to make it clearer ever since. (10:7)) No need to write what is already written and known and open to all who will pay any attention. So this is not complicated; this is something we all know already.

It will taste sweet as honey in your mouth but, when you swallow, it will be very bitter in the stomach. Sweet because “the Law” (Torah – known and open) contains the precepts of righteousness that could make life on earth so very beautiful for everyone: Prosperity and peace for everyone. No more lying, cheating, killing, deceit. Everyone could trust everyone else. What would it be like to live in a world that truly honored and obeyed Torah? We could all leave our houses and cars unlocked all the time. No purse or idea or wife or husband or child would ever be stolen. No one would ever lie to us, nor we to them. No advertisement would ever mislead us. No woman would ever fear being molested. No one would work to exhaustion, or try to get ahead by outdoing others. What sort of “community” would be possible then? And all of us would love God and obey the Commandments, which are, of course, designed for true community. It seems so “close” – so “possible” – that it makes the mouth water. Can we not all just “see it” and agree to keep the precepts? Would we not all benefit and be blessed far beyond anything we can imagine gaining by the ways we break the rules? If only everyone would keep the Covenant, it would be so beautiful we can barely stand the thought of it. Sweet in the mouth indeed!

And how very bitter in the stomach – because we cannot or will not keep the Covenant. Somehow, some way, we and all those around us are forever breaking the Covenant in ways large and small. And how bitter is the bitterness of our pride and our sin that keep us alienated from God and each other? It is the bitterest bitter there is. *“All have sinned and fall short”* *“Who will deliver me from this body of death”*

Suddenly the tenth chapter is not obtuse or foggy at all. John’s language and symbolism are only reminding us – making it fresh and real again. Will that not also be true of many passages of The Revelation, if we pay enough attention and know our Bibles well enough to catch the connections? (Will you try it with the measuring rod that comes next?)

By the way, if John truly knows that Torah cannot save us – that we cannot “make it” by merely trying hard, making promises, or clenching our fists or gritting our teeth about morality or loving our neighbors; if John knows that only the Lamb, with the marks of slaughter on Him – only the Lamb who transforms from within – can save us, then what are the chances that he is trying to write a book which will threaten us into being good by trying to scare us with punishments, however dire? If I cannot save myself no matter how hard I try, what difference does it make how badly you scare me? What is the purpose of a lake of fire if I cannot save myself in the first place? (Unless, of course, the purpose of fire is purification, not destruction.) Whether I am terrified or unterrified by any kind of Hell makes no difference. The Lamb is my only hope. And not because of anger. Because of love. Will we remember that when we get to the nineteenth chapter? John will.

So let’s skip all the way to the nineteenth chapter and see what we make of it.

REVELATION – CHAPTER 19

The nineteenth chapter of Revelation is tough – tough because so frequently we take it out of context. That is, we forget everything we have heard from John so far: about the Lamb, and how those being saved are beyond counting. Even worse than that, many use the nineteenth chapter as the guideline for interpreting all that has come before, instead of letting all that has come before help us to comprehend what John is saying in the nineteenth chapter.

As for John, I think he's on a roll. That is, I think he knows what he has tried to make clear all along the way, and it doesn't cross his mind that his imagery is now so profound that it can also be completely misunderstood – and that Satan will be able to help people twist it all inside out to the exact opposite of all that Jesus came to proclaim in both deed and word.

In short, I suspect that when we meet John in the next realms, we will often find him weeping. And he will say, "I really thought I was writing something beautiful and so compelling that it would help Christians to grasp more powerfully than ever the true magnitude and wonder of what Jesus is doing. But from here I can see that for most of the people who have read my book, it has turned them back to the anger and vengeance and hatred of the way we lived and believed before we ever heard of Jesus. How could I have done so much damage, when I thought I was doing so much good?"

Nevertheless, I keep hoping that it is not too late for John and his Revelation to speak to us as he always intended that it would. So let us track it for a while.

The nineteenth chapter starts off with what it really wants to say: A great multitude in heaven crying "Hallelujah!" Hail to Yahweh. "Salvation and glory and power belong to our God." The great celebration is because the evil empire has been toppled. In this case, Rome, but most of us would have no trouble expanding the message to apply to any empire that sustains itself by trampling on people with brute force, coercion, domination, cruelty, deprivation, and death. Of course, to one degree or another, this applies to every earthly empire. It is the way of the world. Rome started out better than most. From John's perspective, it has ended up worse than most. (Of course, even John does not see the future clearly. There are dark days for Christians ahead, to be sure. But John does not foresee that down the road an emperor named Constantine will convert, and the entire empire will become at least nominally Christian. Nor is it the "end of the age." We do not get the "last judgment"; we get the church – which in some ways is even harder: living in, but not of, the world. But never mind.)

In any case, the nineteenth chapter starts off about the way *Star Wars* ends – a wild celebration because the evil empire has been defeated. The implication, in both cases, is that now everyone can live happily ever after.

So God reigns (rules and governs) – as God always does, but now we see it clearly again. And the marriage of the Lamb has come. Who is the bride of Christ? Of course: the church. (But you know better than to get me started on that.) However, when we think about how blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb, we do need to remember who is being saved: This is a gathering of a multitude beyond counting – from every tribe, nation, language. This is not just for Jews, or for those whom we identify as Christians. The Lamb goes way beyond all our borders, all our love, and all our understanding.

But I already admitted that the nineteenth chapter is tough. And in part it is because John is so excited that his imagery tumbles over itself. Are we going to talk about the marriage of the Lamb, or are we going to talk about the last battle that got us to the wedding? And in the middle of it all, John wants to reassure us that the forces we have so feared – Satan, the beast, and the evil empire and its leaders – will never trouble us again.

Let's stay with the last battle for a minute. That's hard to do because it is over so fast we often miss it. Another one of John's surprises. We rather expect this last battle to be the climax of the book, but it is more like a double take, akin to the Lion/Lamb surprise of chapter five.

We are in chapter nineteen, verses 11 to 16. Verses 11 to 14 set the scene: The white horse comes. This is not one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. This One is far greater. He is "faithful and true." His eyes are like a flame of fire: they see all, and see it for what it really is, and they purify what they look at. Many diadems – crowns: He rules over all. He has a name no one knows but Himself: be careful about claiming to know His true identity. (A thing the creedal writers should have remembered.) He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood: the Lamb still has the marks of slaughter on Him. And we are given two names: "*The Word of God*" (19:13), and "*King of kings and Lord of lords*" (19:16). Jesus is the living Word of God, not the words written on pages – which we so often try to substitute for Him. The Word of God is what God is doing – what God is bringing into being. And Jesus is the agent by which God is doing this.

"King of kings and Lord of lords" was once the title Romans gave to Augustus Caesar. But Christians have long since adopted it as one of their favorite titles for Jesus. John would have been particularly enamored of this title because, in the practice of assigning numerical

values to letters, this title in Greek comes out to 777. Revelation is a book of sevens, and probably for this very reason. 666 is the number of the Beast (and of Neron Caesar), and 777 is the number of the Christ.

So Jesus has come to the “last battle” at last. And the armies of heaven are arrayed behind Him – also on white horses, and dressed in ... what kind of armor? Dressed in fine linen, white and pure. How can they (or we) be part of this army? They are the converted, they are the forgiven – they are reconciled to God because of what Jesus has done for them. The best of them, according to John, have died as martyrs – not killed others according to our idea of warriors. They bear witness to the love of Christ. They are the spiritually transformed. And is there any place in the Book of Revelation where you find this army of Jesus spearing, striking, chopping, hurting ... *anybody*?

So where is the “last battle”? *“From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron.”* (19:15) But His rule comes *after* they are defeated. And the rod of iron is John’s way of saying that Jesus’ authority cannot be broken.

But where is the last battle? It is already over. He will strike down the nations with the sword that comes from His mouth. He will slay them all with His Word. And His Word is the Word of God’s love. He will slay them the same way He slays all of us: by breaking our hearts as we realize the anger and animosity and rebelliousness by which we have always defended and distanced ourselves against God. And in the moments of deep honesty, when we expect wrath and punishment and rejection – when we realize the damage we have done, and how much we have hurt or tried to hurt Him – then we find compassion instead; we find grace and forgiveness; we are stunned by how much He loves us, and how often He has tried to reach us over all the years. That is what slays us. We die to the old life, and He raises us up to New Life.

Do we really think that John has never heard of the Gospel? That John doesn’t know anything about baptism – about dying to the old self and being raised to New Life? The sword is sharp indeed, but the sword is His Word, and His Word kills by converting us. How does Jesus defeat His enemies? Maybe we should pay attention to the record: Does Peter die for having denied Him? Yes indeed; when that cock crows, something in Peter dies forever. He will never be the same. Peter will never deny his Lord again, even if they crucify him too – which they do.

How does Jesus defeat Saul of Tarsus? Certainly Saul had been a serious and determined enemy. Aside from Stephen, we don't know how many Christians died because of Paul's opposition. But Paul himself implies that there were many. How does Jesus defeat Paul? Conversion, forgiveness, commission. Paul cannot believe the mercy – or the valuing. He cannot imagine anybody deserving it less. He is slain. *"It is no longer I, but Christ who dwells within me."* And nobody ever talks more than Paul about dying with Christ, or being raised with Him.

But now one verse from the nineteenth chapter of Revelation and we are going to forget all that – deny and reverse all that? Yet the verse from Revelation is *not* denying it. It is using imagery John assumes we all know. Jesus will slay the nations by the Word of God's love that comes from His mouth. They will all die to their old lives of despair, anger, vengeance, and hatred. And they will put on their new linen garments and go to war the way Jesus goes to war. Well, not as well as Jesus does it, but they will try.

And so it is time to wake up, and stay awake. In the entire Book of Revelation, the only blood Jesus spills is His own! He does not *kill* us. He dies for us. You will not convince me that John does not know this – that he never heard of this. Or that his book is trying to take us all back to how we thought and lived and responded to God – or to how we responded to the struggles and trials of life – before Jesus ever came.

"He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty." The war is already over. This is a closing comment, as is the name on His robe and on His thigh: *"King of kings, and Lord of lords."* Some people let words like "fury" and "wrath" trigger all the old patterns within them. But I think we have come too far and heard too much. Jesus *does* tread the "grapes of wrath." And maybe John is being too obtuse, or too careless about how many can follow his imagery here. But he has laid enough groundwork to entice us to at least *want* to follow his meaning. Where can we go with grapes, with winepress, with fury and wrath? The Last Supper. The anguish in the Garden. *"If it be possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will."* And then, in the real story, Jesus goes to the Cross – and rises again as King of kings and Lord of lords. Does John lose you? He doesn't lose me. I can barely breathe, as it all comes flooding back in ... but not because he lost me.

In the great battle and chaos of life – the warfare between good and evil, between light and darkness – all of us get wounded, hurt, brutalized, killed. It is a broken world. This is not our destination; this is not our final end. Not only do all of us die, we all sin and fall short. Is that still a mystery? “Hey, you made a mistake – I made a mistake.” What a huge surprise!

But Jesus is not the one killing or punishing us. He does not hate or destroy us. He is the one saving us. (In fact, we *do* shed His blood. Until converted, we *do* hate and kill Him.) In any case, if we miss the meaning of the sword that comes out of His mouth in the last battle of Revelation, then we miss it all.

Why does the sword come out of His mouth? Because it is His Message! He is the Word of God and the Message of God – and to our utter astonishment, it is a Message of grace, and forgiveness, and love. Is that not why the Gospel continues to surprise and convert us, change our hearts, throw everything into a new light and a New Way? “*Behold, I am making all things new*” – even you. (Revelation 21:5)