will annul and reform this wounded world.

Therefore, says our seer of the Book of Revelation, take comfort, all who labor for the lamb and taste defeat. Lift up your hearts, all who suffer in your following of the lamb. That lamb has won for us a victory which none can take away. It is that lamb, slaughtered for our sins and risen for our salvation, who is in control of the events that sweep and swirl around us, clouding with the dust of history our vision of that final goal. The lamb stands, despite the worst that humankind could do. God has defeated death by his Christ, and thus, as Paul also knew, there is nothing that now can stand between us and God's love for his reconciled creation (Rom. 8:8:31–39; cf. 5:8–11). That is the good news by which we live, by which we suffer if so it be, by which we die. That is the good news that comes from our verses to people caught in darkness and despair, people burdened with sin too great to carry, people who long for a brighter vision of a better world. That is the future, portrayed in this picture of the throne room of God's own glory, to which we press, we who follow the lamb who was slaughtered but is now alive and regnant. That is the comfort we derive from this promise of a world in the hands of a redeeming savior, the comfort of knowing that our warfare shall be ended in victory, that our burdens shall be lifted from our tired spirits, and that we shall see the glory of the Lord and of his Christ. Therefore we too are to raise our voices in joyful praise to the lamb that has got us our victory! "To him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever. Amen!" (Rev. 5:13).

Balmer H. Kelly
Professor of Biblical Theology, Emeritus
Union Theological Seminary in Virginia

Revelation 7:9–17

THE BOOK OF REVELATION appeals as much to the sense of hearing as to the sense of sight. At the beginning, before the first "vision," there is the "loud voice like a trumpet" (1:10); and at the end the author makes his final self-identification as the one "who heard and saw these things" (22:8). Along with the images there are sounds that fill this book with voices, musical instruments, and songs. The Common Lectionary, which provides the church with only occasional brief samplings from the strong food of Revelation, draws these lessons not from the more apocalyptic portions but from the frequent liturgical and musical interruptions or intermissions. These lessons,

which appear mainly in the Year C cycle and during the season of Eastertide, have a degree of independence and may properly be considered as almost self-contained units. Revelations 7:9–17 is no exception, and this interpretation is an attempt to take seriously its hymnic character, looking first at its inner structure and details of language, then at the larger matters of connections, including context and wider relationships, and finally at some possible lines of interpretation for the present-day church and her teachers and preachers.

Structure and Pattern

It is quite possible that elements of 7:9–17 were drawn from diverse liturgical sources, from martyrological hymns, or even from other apocalyptic literature, although the use of other apocalypses is much more probable in the surrounding chapters than here. Certainly the author drew upon sources we are familiar with in the Old Testament, notably in verses 15–17, sketchily elsewhere as well.

Even so, the passage has a clear integrity and pattern of its own. There is first a typical introductory formula, familiar throughout the book and in apocalyptic literature in general: "After this I looked [or saw]." Then there follow two scenes in contrast but remarkably parallel form. Scene One has an earthly personnel, "a great multitude," which is then described in detail (vs. 9–10*a*) and its own distinctive sound, a hymn of praise (v. 16). In the same way Scene Two has a heavenly personnel: angels, elders, and the four living creatures (v. 11), and ends also in a hymn of praise, bracketed by a repeated "Amen." The implication in the reference to the "throne" and the "Lamb" in the two scenes is that the divine presence is the focus of both.

These scenes and sounds introduce a final element which is a dialogue in typical apocalyptic fashion consisting of a query from the one who will provide the answer, a response, and an answer. The answer again is in hymn form, more extensive than the other two, and comprised largely of Old Testament quotations and references. This could easily have had an original existence as a martyr-hymn, composed by or for those who were facing the prospect of torture and death. In its present position, however, it relates directly to the other two hymns and gathers up their thought in a logical climax. The whole passage, then, may properly be understood as a little hymnbook, with each musical entry provided with an appropriate setting.

The full introductory formula, "After this I looked" (RSV), seems to introduce a new vision or train of thought (e.g., 4:1, 7:1, 15:5, 18:1) whereas "I looked" or "I saw" introduce only a new aspect of a vision being described (so also "and behold"). If this is true, then, the sight in 7:9–17 is

different from that in 7:1–8 and not merely another way of describing the same group. Certainly the phrase is not to be thought of as a chronological notation. In the same way the typical "I looked" or "I saw" should not be given literal or physical meaning. To translate the author's highly pictorial images into literal representations is bootless, as for example making an effort to visualize a lamb walking upright and holding a shepherd's crook, to name only one example.

The "sight" here is a great multitude, its size defined by the phrase "which no person would number." That phrase, suggesting limitlessness, is undoubtedly meant to stand in strong contrast to the repetitious numbers of 7:1–8. In the former passage the multitude is specifically limited, here it is unlimited; there the constituency is described in rigid Jewish categories (although the naming of the tribes does not correspond exactly to any Old Testament list), here the persons come from all nations, peoples, and tongues. It may be noted that the verse, like the entire passage and indeed the whole of Revelation, is replete with evidences of Greek that is both ungrammatical and "uncouth," to use E. F. Scott's apt term. No attempt will be made here to cite the many examples of less than elegant Greek, for they do not impede the flow of meaning. The most satisfactory reason for the presence of these infelicities and outright errors is that the writer's mental processes were defined by his native Aramaic and that he used Greek as a learned language, repeating the same blunders as any relative neophyte would do.

In the mention of this "countless multitude" there is either a direct and conscious reference to the call of Abraham in whom all the nations would bless themselves or at least an implicit remembrance of that promise. There also appears here a connection, probably deliberate, with the Servant prophecy and the "light to the Gentiles" that God's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). The connection is supported by the extensive use of the same oracle later in the vision. Three features appear: They are standing before the throne and before the Lamb, they are clothed in white garments, and they have in their hands palm branches. The throne room picture appears in much the same form in chapters 4 and 5. Both white robes and palm branches are images of victory. (See especially I Macc. 13:51 and II Macc. 10:6 where the rededication of the temple is marked by the waving of palm branches. In Revelation 7:9 there does not seem to be a deliberate remembrance of the Feast of Lights. See also, of course, the multitude at Palm Sunday.)

For the hymn itself it is useful to consider the meaning of "salvation." The RSV translation, "salvation belongs to God," is an unjustified paraphrase affected by a too-limited understanding of *sōtēria* as a synonym for

redemption, so avoiding the implication that redemption is given to God, who is himself Savior and Redeemer. In the hymn it is an interjection of praise and is clear when *sōtēria* is understood in its basic sense of "victory." Here, as in fact in other places in the New Testament, not always recognized by translators, the term makes sense in this fundamental meaning, especially as a kind of vindication. To incorporate it in a hymn of praise is as appropriate as the later sevenfold ascription by the angelic choir. (For a similar use of *sōtēria* see Paul's use in Philippians ["this shall turn out for my vindication" in 1:19 and "work through to your own vindication" in 2:12]). In both the NEB and Jerusalem Bible the term in Revelation is properly "victory."

Of the heavenly personnel of Scene Two, the elders and the four living creatures have already been introduced in chapter 4 where the elders are numbered as twenty-four and described as sitting on thrones "around the throne," and the living creatures are given elaborate description. The addition here of angels is not unexpected, but their position is impossible to describe, since they are described in the perhaps incorrect Greek, as round the throne and round the elders and the four creatures. Once again it appears that the imagery defies literal representation. The hymn which adds sound to the heavenly sight is a doxology made up of seven ascriptions, all of them with natural connection with the idea of ultimate victory. An almost exact duplicate of this sevenfold doxology appears in 5:12.

The dialogue which follows the hymns is introduced by the formula "answered and said," familiar in both the Gospels and the Septuagint. It does not require that a stated question should have gone before, only that there is an implied need for clarification. The dialogue-form itself is used in the prophets (see, for example, Amos 7:7–8, 8:1–3; Jer. 1:11–12) and especially in intertestamental apocalyptic literature (see, e.g., II Esdras chaps. 4ff.) The Jerusalem Bible here has a good rendering: "You know and you can tell me." There is one answer to the double question: "Who?" and "Whence?" The character of the multitude is defined by their passage through "the great tribulation" and by their having washed and whitened their clothing. The translation "who have come" is a misleading rendering of the Greek present participle. Although the tense does not necessarily point to contemporaneous time, since it may be determined by the progressive meaning of the verb "to come," it is still not past from the speaker's point of view. A better rendering might be "who come through the great tribulation."

Although there has been a consistent tendency on the part of translators and commentators to identify these as the martyrs in the Roman persecution (see Jerusalem Bible note, "under Nero"), this is almost certainly

in error. The limitless multitude and the whitening of robes in the blood of the Lamb (see Rev. 1:5, 22:14) both point to the whole body of Christians who through the protective power of God survive the great tribulation which is anticipated in this intermission and which is fully set out in the opening of the seventh seal and its accompanying terrors (chap. 8).

The remainder of the passage is a metrical version of the blessed state of those who by faith have named Christ as Lord. The pattern is a three-line stanza, reproduced in RSV for verses 15–17, but which should probably be extended to include verse 14.

In the hymn the verbs "serve" and "shelter" have liturgical connections, the former in its associations with the worship of the Temple (see Heb. 8:2) so that the Christians become the ministering priests in the heavenly sanctuary; the latter, "to shelter" or "to tabernacle," recalls the Exodus event and as well the becoming flesh of the Word (John 1:14). At this point the hymn takes on an Old Testament and prophetic character, since most of the phraseology is direct quotation of Isaiah 49:10 (although not according to the Septuagint). There are other direct or implicit references, as for example to Psalm 23:1–2 and Isaiah 25:8. The prophetic anticipation of a restored and beneficent nature and of a humanity released from the perils and sorrows of present existence gives the author of Revelation, or his source, material to describe the ultimate state of believers. At this point the book stands far more closely to classical Hebrew prophecy than to prior apocalyptic literature.

Connections

As has been noted, the whole of chapter 7 provides a welcome intermission in the procession of terrors accompanying the opening of the "seals," and in particular between the sixth and terrible seventh seal. There are, of course, two visions in the chapter and their relationship is by no means easy to determine with final authority. One may say that the first, centering on the one hundred forty-four thousand, has primary reference either to the whole of Judaism or to a determined remnant thereof. (It has been suggested, in fact, with some reason, that the author took this particular segment from a purely Jewish apocalypse.) The second vision has as its focus a great multitude from totally diverse origins. Two possibilities appear: that the two visions refer to the final union of Judaism and Christianity in the heavenly realm, or that they are two different ways of viewing the same Christian body as heirs to Judaism and its true remnant, and in itself as believers in Christ.

What is most important to keep in mind is that the chapter either as two

visions or one vision in two parts interrupts the flow of apocalyptic thought and calendar. Elsewhere in the book this kind of hymnic triumphant vision usually comes at the conclusion of a series of woes, not as the penult in a series as here.

There are wider connections and contexts. Certainly the vision shares the basic apocalyptic concept of a coming period of great tribulation, the "sorrows of the Messiah" which will precede ultimate victory on the part of God's people by his power and the ushering in of the Messianic Age of felicity and the final destruction of earthly powers of evil with their concommitant woes of hunger, pain, deprivation, persecution, and even death. It must be assumed that these essentially apocalyptic ideas are implied in the background to the vision, but at the same time it is notable that there is closer kinship to the prophetic eschatology of the past than to contemporary apocalypticism. Except for a few details the passage could be imagined as a part of the corpus of II Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Zechariah.

Another connection is the one given to this passage by its inclusion in the Lectionary with its accompanying passages. The Gospel passage is John 10:22–30 with an extension of the Good Shepherd figure, who was introduced as the one who lays down his life for the sheep. In verses 23–30 the connection is even closer, since the Shepherd is the one whom the sheep "follow" and from whose hand no one is able to "snatch" his own. Thus the ideas of protection and provision prominent in Revelation are also prominent here, and the blending of images of Lamb and Shepherd is not inappropriate in view of the Gospel definition of the Shepherd as the one who lays down his life.

The other linked passage is Acts 13:44–52. This turning point in Acts and in its history of the church is Paul's turning from the Jewish synagogue in Antioch to the Gentiles, turning from the structured and implicitly numbered Judaism to the uncounted multitudes of the gentile world. In Revelation there is no hint of the underlying rebuke of Judaism in Acts 13 or of the latent hostility to the Jews in Acts; rather in the Apocalypse two possibly irreconcilable groups are finally united at the throne. It should also be noted that in Acts, Isaiah 49 is taken as a kind of theological foundation.

Conclusions

Strong and appealing lines of thought and interpretation run from Revelation 7:9–17 into the life and message of the church of today. The one that is most central and gives meaning and direction to the rest is the focus on victory. The text belongs where the Lectionary places it: at

Eastertide; and it provides the teacher or preacher with themes and images that reinforce the Resurrection truth. Set in the very midst of unrelieved horrors, of "terror on every side," it never blunts its announcement of victory, of ultimate triumph and of the final security of believers. Preceding, as it does, the "great tribulation" of chapter 8, it is not unlike the setting and content of the last discourse of John's Gospel with its statement of anticipated victory in its calm "I have overcome the world."

Revelation 7:9–17 is, therefore, an unalloyed "gospel," a seeing and hearing of the final justification of Christian hope. If it is to be part of the church's proclamation, then, especially in Eastertide, it ought to be proclaimed without "if" and "perhaps." Similarly it will not do merely to hold out before persons tempted to despair only a future prospect, coupled with the advice to live out the times in between in chronological waiting. The strength of the biblical hope is that it focuses on what is *real* rather than simply on what will be. Triumph *will be* because it is the fundamental truth of human life corresponding to the truth of God. Although apocalyptic enthusiasts have frequently reduced the images of Revelation to a time-conditioned calendar, the author surely meant to give the church a vision of God's victorious vindication always ready to break upon the human scene, so that in the Apocalypse, perhaps more strongly than anywhere else, it is a case of the future determining and creating the present.

In this connection it is helpful to question the translation of New Testament future tenses as chronologically in future time. Many times the future tense is the mode of stating absolute fact and is correctly rendered by the English emphatic present. So in the present passage it makes good sense to translate the verbs of the hymn at the end in this fashion. God *does* dwell with them; they *do not* hunger; God *does* wipe away all tears. This blending of what is truth about God with truth about human life was never better paralleled than in Charles Wesley's great hymn paraphrase of parts of Revelation 7:9–17.

Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
And publish abroad His wonderful name;
The name, all-victorious, of Jesus extol
His Kingdom is glorious, He rules over all.
Our God ruleth on high, almighty to save;
And still he is nigh, His presence we have,
The great congregation His triumph shall sing,
Ascribing salvation to Jesus, our King.
"Salvation to God who sits on the throne"
Let all cry aloud and honor the Son.

The praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
Fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb.
Then let us adore, and give Him his right,
All glory and power, and wisdom and might,
All honor and blessing, with angels above,
And thanks never ceasing and infinite love.
("O Worship the King All Glorious Above," 1744)

Anyone, private interpreter, preacher, or teacher will profit from a close examination of Isaiah 49, which does provide much of the theological foundation for the thought here. The Isaianic motifs of the double mission of the Servant to the tribes of Jacob and to the nations, the salvation which is to reach to the end of the earth, and the protecting, shepherding, and restoring work of Yahweh and of his Servant are in Revelation brought to fulfillment with the single defining addition of the Lamb who is "before the midst of the throne." This redefinition of the traditional messianic figure of apocalyptic thought as the Lamb who is sacrificial victim is not only an important insight for the author, but it also carries direction for the church which follows the Lamb.

This exposition was begun with a reminder that in Revelation 7:9–17 hearing is as important as seeing, and that to understand the passage one must listen not just to what is said but to the music that resounds in the way it is said. This may be the basic guideline for one who is concerned with proclamation or teaching. In the unfolding of the thought of the passage there should be some kind of parallel to the sound and harmony of the poetry. Interpreters need not break into song, but their words can echo the richness and even the metrical order of these hymns. If that seems an impossible task, reference should be made to Elizabeth Achtemeier's article, "The Use of Hymnic Elements in Preaching" (INTERP. 39 [1985], p. 46) which is as important a resource for proclaiming this truth as any commentary. By resisting the temptation to literalize or spiritualize the sights of this vision and by letting the mythic flavor remain, the interpreter gives opportunity for persons to bring their own thoughts to the sights for new insight. To let the hymns be heard in their own harmony is to enable persons to have new melodies sounding in their ears, which is surely close to the author's original purpose.