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The Distant Triumph Song: Music and the Book of Revelation

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Mark Twain considered scenes of the saints ceaselessly singing and playing their harps in heaven to be among the most ludicrous imaginings of the human mind. His reasoning was simple: such a heaven would contain nothing that human beings actually value. To be more specific, “Most men do not sing, most men cannot sing, most men will not stay where others are singing if it be continued more than two hours.” Yet in heaven everyone is expected to sing all day every day without respite, and the music is invariably one of the same dozen or so hymns. Moreover, every one is supposed to play a harp, “whereas not more than twenty in the thousand of them could play an instrument in the earth, or ever wanted to.” Multiply this by the millions and millions of voices in heaven and the prospect is a cacophony of gargantuan proportions.¹

Twain’s remarks are aimed in large part at the book of Revelation, which is the source for many of the popular images of heaven, from the strains of angelic harp music to the splendor of the pearly gates. His satirical commentary aptly points out how readily Revelation’s portrayal of the celestial chorus can be reduced to sentimentality, challenging us to rediscover the depth and power of this material. Music plays a larger role in the book of Revelation than in any other book of the New Testament, and few books in all of Scripture have spawned more hymns sung in Christian worship today. Attention to how the hymnic material in Revelation would have sounded to the Christians who first heard it, to the place of these hymns in Revelation as a whole, and to their relation to the rest of Scripture can help revitalize the singing of the hymns these passages have inspired.

¹Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1962) 16-18.

I. SONGS OF A DISPUTED SOVEREIGNTY

The story begins on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, where a visionary named John had been forcibly interned. The book of Revelation is a letter that he penned to seven churches on the mainland (Rev 1:4, 9-11). In the second and third chapters of the letter, John surveyed the conditions of these congregations, which were scattered throughout the Roman province of Asia, delineating the threats confronting each of them: (1) a seductive form of false teaching, which encouraged Christians to assimilate more fully into Roman society by eating meat sacrificed to idols, plagued congregations in the region’s leading city, Ephesus; the provincial capital, Pergamum; and the important commercial center, Thyatira; (2) conflict with local synagogues and the specter of being denounced to the provincial authorities and suffering possible imprisonment or death loomed over Christians at Smyrna and Philadelphia; (3) complacency, born from the prosperity fostered by the Roman economic system, sapped the

vitality from the faith of the Christians at Sardis and Laodicea.²

The sound of a trumpet-like voice in Rev 4:1 heralded the beginning of a new scene that confronted Christians in all these situations with a vision of God on the throne. He was cloaked with a rainbow and a sea of glass stretched before his feet. Four fantastic creatures, full of eyes in front and behind, and twenty-four elders dressed in white attended him. Lightning flashed, thunder roared, and from the mouths of the creatures burst forth—a song. And “day and night they never cease to sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty’” (4:8). The twenty-four elders were caught up into the music and cast down their golden crowns before the throne. Bowing down, they joined in singing, “Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” (4:11).

The chorus of praise was soon interrupted by the voice of an angel, calling for the One who is worthy to open the seals of the scroll held by the hand of God (5:1-2). Moments later a Lamb appeared, “as though it had been slain.” When the Lamb stepped forward, the thundering songs of praise began anew, as the creatures and the elders acclaimed him worthy to take the scroll and break its seals, because by his blood he had ransomed people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (4:9). The music swelled as myriads of angels joined in singing “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (5:12). Then music exploded into a cosmic chorus of praise, as every creature in heaven and on earth and every living thing under the earth and in the sea added their voices to the worship of God and the Lamb (5:13).

These songs, which beckon readers to join in the chorus, are the songs of a disputed sovereignty. The Lord God reigns, but not without opposition. The identity of the rival to the throne would have been all too clear to Christians in the Roman province of Asia. Caesar had his own throne and was attended by his own collection of dignitaries. Those who approached him were to bow in humble adoration, and delegations from the communities in his far-flung empire would offer him crowns of gold. Courtiers were notorious for keeping up a perpetual

²For helpful discussion of conditions in the seven churches see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) chaps. 3-4.

chorus of praise, lauding him day and night with appellations ordinarily reserved for deities. The current emperor, Domitian, exceeded the hubris of his predecessors by claiming for himself precisely the titles “Lord and God.” Imperial propaganda and popular oratory stressed the magnitude of the emperor’s achievements and the acclaim awarded him by peoples everywhere.³

Christians who echoed the celestial refrains in their own earthly worship were confessing that sovereignty belonged to God and the Lamb, and not to any other aspirant to the throne. The implications for the seven churches in Asia were manifold: (1) the songs gave voice to a singular loyalty that countered tendencies to assimilate comfortably into the idolatry of the surrounding culture; (2) the songs announced that the creative and redeeming power of God and the Lamb would endure forever, emboldening those faced with persecution and death to remain firm in the faith; (3) the songs declared that power, wealth, and wisdom belong to the Lamb who was slain, thereby tacitly warning Christians not to let the prosperous times lull them into a state of spiritual torpor.

The strains of the heavenly music continue to be echoed in Christian worship today and

its implications remain the same. The sounds are both assuring and unsettling:

1. Those who sing “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty” (*LBW* #165)⁴ continue to confess a singular loyalty to God in the militant recognition that “*Only* thou art holy, there is *none* beside thee, Perfect in pow’r in love and purity” (emphasis added)

2. Hymns still voice the confident hope that “The saints who here in patience their cross and sufferings bore, shall live and reign forever when sorrow is no more. Around the throne of glory the Lamb they shall behold; in triumph cast before him their diadems of gold” (*LBW* #25—“Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers”)

3. The complacent, however, should be “startled at the solemn warning” implicit in this material, in order to prepare with renewed zeal to see “the Lamb, so long expected, come with pardon down from heav’n” (*LBW* #37—“Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!”)

II. SONGS ABOVE THE SPIRAL OF TERROR

The Lamb took the scroll, opened its seals, and thereby unleashed the kaleidoscopic visions of horror and splendor that dominate the central part of the book. The drama does not unfold in a straight line, but moves forward in a spiraling motion, in which readers are taken through successive cycles of tribulations, each culminating with a vision of divine glory.⁵ Interpreters have often tried to construct time lines based on the book of Revelation in the hope of finding some security in knowing how far we are from the end. But the spiraling cycles of visions

³David E. Aune, “The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John,” *Biblical Research* 28 (1983) 5-26.

⁴Hymns are quoted from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis and Philadelphia: Augsburg Publishing House and Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), here abbreviated *LBW*.

⁵On the structure of Revelation, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979) ix-xiv.

make it impossible to place any confidence in our ability to discern the timing of the end, driving us back repeatedly to trust in God alone.

As the first four seals were broken (chap. 6), the Four Horsemen came thundering forth to carry out their grisly tasks of conquest, war, famine, and death. At the fifth seal, the martyrs beneath God’s heavenly altar cried out, “How long?” but were told to wait a little longer.⁶

Earthquakes, darkness, and terror intensified with the opening of the sixth seal, until the peoples of the earth cried out that the great day of divine wrath had come, asking who could stand before it. As if in response, the scene shifts to the 144,000 sealed for God and to the great multitude that no one could number, dressed in radiant white before the throne, with palm branches in their hands, blessing God (chap. 7). With the great tribulation now behind them, the question is asked:

Who is this host arrayed in white,
Like thousand snow-clad mountains bright,
That stands with palms and sings its psalms,
Before the throne of light?

And the response is given:

These are the saints who kept God's Word;
They are the honored of the Lord.
He is their prince who drowned their sins,
So they were cleansed, restored. (LBW #314; Rev 7:13-17)

The victorious scene helps to inspire the faith of readers still facing the prospect of suffering, knowing that God holds the future.

The blissful vision of the saints culminated with a great silence in heaven; this quickly gave way to another turbulent cycle of tribulations on earth as seven angels prepared to blow their trumpets. When the first four angels sounded a call, the earth was scorched and the sea turned to blood, a blazing star fell from heaven making the rivers bitter, and the lights in the heavens were darkened (chap. 8). The sound of the fifth trumpet brought forth a plague of locusts from the bottomless pit that inflicted torment upon the faithless, and the sixth trumpet released millions of cavalry whose horses killed a third of humankind with the deadly fire and smoke issuing from their mouths (chap. 9). Two of God's faithful witnesses were martyred and resurrected, the earth trembled, and the seventh angel sounded his trumpet as a chorus in heaven rang out:

The kingdom of the world has become
The kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,
And he shall reign forever and ever. (Rev 11:15)

The twenty-four elders bowed in worship and joined in celebrating the glorious reign of God.

Yet readers are again swept away by another series of visions in which the kingdom of the world is emphatically *not* the kingdom of God and his Christ. First, there is a war in heaven and Michael's angelic hosts hurl Satan, in the form of a

⁶The second verse of the hymn "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" (LBW #328, 329) includes the martyrs who call from beneath the altar.

serpent, down upon the earth where he persecutes the woman who represents the people of God (chap. 12). In the second and third visions, the power of Satan becomes incarnate in a beast that rises out of the sea to persecute the saints and in a beast that rises out of the land to constrain all people to idolatry (chap. 13). The distant song of the saints on Mt. Zion drifts gently through the fourth vision, until a voice announces "the glory of the coming of the Lord" for judgment in the fifth vision, and an angel "trampled out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored," producing a river of blood that would surpass the carnage of any battlefield (chap. 14).⁷ But again the cycle culminates with the saints beside the sea of glass, sharing in God's victory by remaining faithful to death. Like the Israelites who celebrated God's triumph over pharaoh beside the sea (Exod 15:1-18; cf. Deut 32:1-43), the saints sang the song of Moses, which now became the song of the Lamb:

Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are thy ways, O King of the ages! (Rev 15:3)

This celebration of deliverance is followed by another cycle of seven visions that recall the plagues visited on the Egyptians of old (Exodus 7-11). People were afflicted with sores, and waters were turned to blood; the sun's fiery heat scorched the land, the earth became engulfed in darkness; foul frog-like spirits assembled kings of the whole world for battle, and enormous hailstones fell from the sky. Then God made the great adversary of his people drink the cup of his wrath. This great antagonist has an almost timeless character. It is called "Babylon," after the city whose armies destroyed the first temple in 586 B.C., yet it is portrayed as a city set on seven hills, like Rome, the city whose armies destroyed the second temple in A.D. 70. The city is also depicted as a harlot, which recalls the way the Scriptures depicted Israel's enemies of various times and places, including Nineveh (Nahum 3:4) and Tyre (Isa 23:17). The destruction of this foe is accompanied by a kind of dirge for the fallen city (chap. 18) followed by a resounding "Hallelujah chorus":

Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. (19:6, KJV)

The destruction of the harlot was complete; the bride had made herself ready, and the voices of a great multitude announced that the marriage supper of the Lamb had come.

Or had it? Again, readers are hurled back into the fray, and the wedding feast has to wait for another thousand years. A rider on a white horse appears—not the menacing rider who appeared before in league with famine and death (6:1-2), but Christ himself (19:11-21). Now the "Son of God goes forth to war a kingly crown to gain. His blood-red banner streams afar; who follows in his train?" (*LBW* #183). What the hymn calls a "banner" is actually Christ's own robe, which is stained with blood before this battle begins, for this warrior is the Lamb, who triumphs through his own suffering and death. Those who follow in his train are the hosts of heaven arrayed in white, who witness Christ conquer by the power of his word. Satan is bound for a thousand years and the martyrs are raised to share Christ's blessed rule. Afterward, Satan is released to meet his final doom. The dead are

⁷The imagery is incorporated into "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (*LBW* #332).

raised, the judgment is given (chap. 20), and—at last—the New Jerusalem descends to be the bride of Christ (21:1-8).

Those who read the book of Revelation find themselves tumbling through cycle after cycle of visions, each culminating with a glimpse of divine glory that is often celebrated in song. This dizzying progression makes it impossible to fit the events portrayed here into a neat time line. Readers can take no comfort in their own ability to discern the nearness of the end. The book does not enable us to discern whether we are living at the time of the sixth seal (6:12), the fourth trumpet (8:12), or the fifth plague (16:10). The spiraling images of savagery and blessedness do permit us to declare that the evil we experience is real, but not final. The terrors may mount in cycle after cycle, threatening to become unbearable, but "when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, And hearts are brave again and arms

are strong, Alleluia! Alleluia!” (LBW #174—“For All the Saints”).

III. SONGS OF THE NEW JERUSALEM

The vision of the New Jerusalem has probably inspired more songs and hymns than any other portion of the book of Revelation. The promise that the sorrow and sufferings of this life will give way to endless bliss in a city paved with gold continues to capture the imaginations of Christian people—Mark Twain notwithstanding. The vision of the city has often been understood as a vivid expression of human aspirations. We lament, “Jerusalem, my happy home, when shall I come to thee? When shall my sorrows have an end? Thy joys when shall I see?” And in response we hear of the “happy harbor of the saints, O sweet and pleasant soil! In thee no sorrow may be found, no grief, no care, no toil” (LBW #331). But when we consider the New Jerusalem vision in its context in Revelation and within the Scriptures as a whole, it becomes apparent that to sing of the New Jerusalem is to sing of the faithfulness of God.

The descent of the city fulfills a catena of biblical promises.⁸ In Rev 21:1-4 we see a new heaven and a new earth, and a joyous city, for the former things have passed away, as Isaiah foretold (Isa 65:17-19). The New Jerusalem is adorned as a bride prepared for her husband (Isa 61:10), and death is no more (Isa 25:8). The city will be God’s promised dwelling place, where he will be their God and they will be his people (Lev 26:11-12; Ezek 37:27; Zech 2:10-11). The echoes of biblical promises continue in Rev 21:5-8, where God offers water to the thirsty (Isa 55:1) and grants everyone who is faithful the dignity of becoming his son (2 Sam 7:14).

Even the features of the New Jerusalem confirm God’s faithfulness to the promises. Long before, the prophet Ezekiel had been taken to a high mountain and shown a city that resembled a sanctuary; it was perfectly square and had twelve gates named for the twelve tribes of Israel (Ezek 40:1-4; 48:30-35). The seer of Revelation watched as the city with its twelve gates descended from heaven, but in a splendor that surpassed anything presaged in the Old Testament (Rev 21:9-21). Its walls were fifteen hundred miles long and fifteen hundred miles high—truly a “Jerusalem whose towers touch the skies” (LBW #348). The city was illuminated by

⁸See the discussion in my *The Dwelling of God* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1989) chap. 6.

the glory of God, as Ezekiel had promised, and living waters flowed through its streets around the tree of life, which bore its fruit all year (Ezek 43:1-5; 47:1-12; Rev 21:22-22:2). In the context of the Scriptures as a whole, to sing, “Thy gardens and thy gallant walks continually are green; there grow such sweet and pleasant flow’rs as nowhere else are seen” (LBW #331 —“Jerusalem, My Happy Home”) *is to confess that God’s promises will not fail.*

Revelation is fundamentally a book about God and the Lamb. In it, the end is not an event, but a person.⁹ God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (1:8; 21:6), and the climactic vision in the book rings with the announcement that his “words are trustworthy and true” (21:5; 22:6). The jewels of the city glisten brightly and its gardens are filled with luxuriant foliage, but the saints turn to the throne of God and the Lamb, worshiping God face to face (22:3-4). The hymns inspired by the book of Revelation work to the same end, seeking to capture singers for the Lord, so that

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Alleluia! Alleluia!
(*LBW* #174)

266. ⁹G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966)