

21 May 2022

## **The Rider on the White Horse (Revelation 19. 11-21)**

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I've said that (for me) one of the gifts and challenges of the Revelation to John is its powerful sense that evil is operative in our world. This Scripture demands we take seriously the scale and implacability of opposition to goodness – whether this takes the form of atrocities perpetrated by an invading army, or the merciless injustice that blights so many lives. In the past couple of weeks, I've said that the text is clear that God's goodness has already and will ultimately prevail, but the question we've been exploring is how. How is evil overcome? I've been suggesting that in the vision of Revelation, it's in God's (and our) willingness to undergo suffering rather than inflict it, that the real power of goodness lies.

It must be said, however, that the passage we just heard seems difficult to reconcile with this interpretation! 20<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholar C.H. Dodd certainly thought so: 'The God of the Apocalypse can hardly be recognized as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', he wrote, 'nor has the fierce Messiah, whose warriors ride in blood up to their horses' bridles, many traits that could recall Him of whom [it was] proclaimed that he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil'.<sup>1</sup> It's as if, in the end, the text goes back on itself, proclaiming that divine violence is ultimately necessary for punishing evil-doing and securing the world's good. Or does it?

The appearance of the Rider on the White Horse comes at the culminating point of John's vision of the battle between good and evil, between the power of God and the power of 'the beast'. Scholars note there are numerous parallels between this passage and Jewish texts that portray God or God's Messiah as a

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in David J. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), p.219.

warrior king.<sup>2</sup> But there are also differences – and the subtle reworkings of this theme turn out to be key to interpreting John’s meaning.

A major clue is that the Rider emerges from heaven clothed in a robe that is *already* dipped in blood. Where the prophets’ visions of Yahweh riding to victory depict his robes stained with the blood of his enemies, here the Messiah’s robes are bloody *before* he goes into battle.<sup>3</sup> This is a revisioning of the imagery of the warrior king. It suggests that, far from the blood on his robes belonging to those he’s cut down, it belongs to him. Again and again, we’ve noted in Revelation that where we might expect to see the ‘Lion of Judah’ accomplishing the cause of God, we see instead ‘the Lamb slain’. Where we might expect to see the warrior king inflicting violent death on his enemies, we see his power to overcome evil connected to his own undergoing of suffering and death. David Neville writes: ‘The means by which **the Lamb** conquers remain the means by which **the Rider** defeats all opposed to the purposes of God’.<sup>4</sup>

And this makes sense of the description of the Rider’s weapon. For the sharp sword with which he strikes the nations is said to come from his **mouth**. Which signifies that those opposed are defeated, not by military might, but by the Word of God. The imagery is horrible! Birds are called to feast on the corpses of the vanquished. But, as Neville points out, ‘there is no description of battle, only the end result that the beast and false prophet are captured and thrown into the lake of fire while the rest are “slaughtered” by the sword emanating from the Rider’s mouth’.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than a depiction of a literal end-time battle, then, this is a representation of how the power of evil is consumed by the coming of ‘King of kings’ (note the metaphor of the lake of fire), while those whose allegiance has been given to the beast are destroyed by the Truth, the Word of God, and brought to nothing –

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<sup>2</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.235.

<sup>3</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.237.

<sup>4</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.236.

<sup>5</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.238.

like so much carrion eaten by birds.<sup>6</sup> Its violent imagery notwithstanding, Revelation's vision of how God acts to overcome the power of evil remains essentially nonviolent.

But this leaves us with the very difficult question of what it means for how we (who seek to belong to the Lamb and do the will of God) are to respond to the evil that continues operative in our world. The text of Revelation appears to proscribe, not only divine, but also human recourse to violence. In chapter 13, for example, it's said that in this time before the end, the beast is 'allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them', as well as to have 'authority over every tribe and people and language and nation'. It continues: 'Let anyone who has an ear listen: If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints' (Rev 13. 7-10). And again, in chapter 14, there is a 'call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus', and a pronouncement of blessing on those 'who from now on die in the Lord', for, 'says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labours, for their deeds will follow them"' (Rev. 14.13).

But does this mean that we're supposed to put up no resistance to evil? That whenever unjust force seeks to coerce us or others we must simply let it have its way, trusting in the larger truth that, in Neville's words, 'If God the Creator is able to bring something meaningful and good out of the Lamb's suffering and death, that same God is able to bring something meaningful and good out of the suffering and woundedness of the world and those in it?'<sup>7</sup>

Well, this takes us into extremely difficult moral territory – and since the beginning, the Christian tradition has wrestled with the question of whether Christians can ever justify violent action for the sake of defending or bringing about

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<sup>6</sup> See also, Richard Hays, 'Those who read the battle imagery of Revelation with a literalist bent fail to grasp the way in which the symbolic logic of the work as a whole dismantles the symbolism of violence'. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.238.

<sup>7</sup> Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.234.

the good, or whether we must practice radical nonviolence, preferring always to be persecuted and killed than to kill. We're not going to solve this tonight. But let me offer three things that I think must be part of how we grapple here.

First – I don't think Revelation is encouraging us to be passive victims of evil, mere cannon fodder for the principalities and powers. The text speaks of the endurance of those who are seeking to align their will and action with the will and action of God in Christ. This allegiance to the good renders them at risk in a violent world, but it also connects them to a larger source of power. This comes out strongly in the symbolism of the text. The army that accompanies the rider on the white horse is said to be robed in white (Rev. 19.14); and this 'whiteness' is a consequence (we're told in chapter 7) of them having 'washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (7.14).

In other words, those who come out with Christ to participate in overcoming evil, are those who have been drawn by him into the dynamic of his life and death. Like him, they have so entrusted themselves to God that they are no longer the source of their own life ... they need neither to possess nor defend themselves, for they receive their identity from him. Yet paradoxically, and we know this from our practice of meditation, the more we undergo this process self-dispossession, the more we discover ourselves free to be and act from the power, truth and creativity of God. And this means that, like Christ, in situations where someone seeks to diminish, bully or coerce us or those around us, we are vastly more capable of speaking and acting in such a way as to open up different possibilities, and reveal the ultimate futility of evil. This, I think, is analogous to what Mohandas Gandhi called 'soul power', which enables us to resist injustice at a different level from the level of those inflicting it. Revelation does not encourage us to be passive victims of evil, but to come out to meet it in liberty of spirit, undetermined by its malevolent intent and profoundly connected to the transforming power of the Good.

Second and relatedly, to the extent that evil continues operative in our world, it is necessary and right to seek to check or restrain its activity. In Revelation, as the

beast and false prophet are consumed by fire, John sees ‘an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain’ by which ‘the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan’ is bound ‘so that he would deceive the nations no more’ (Rev. 20. 1-3). Peter Llewellyn notes that ‘if the kingdom of *this world* is to become the kingdom of Christ then the principle of de-creation must be reversed: the abyss must be chained again, chaos must be restrained. This is the meaning of the binding of Satan’.<sup>8</sup>

In contemporary literature of non-violence, there is something analogous. Michael Wood writes: ‘Nonviolence is not pacifism before violence but a loving response to violence, as we assert a nonviolent, creative alternative to dominant powers. As such nonviolence includes a strong no to abusive or intimidating power directed towards us’. A symbol for this is what Wood calls ‘the two hands of nonviolence’.<sup>9</sup> One hand is held up like a stop sign with palm facing out, signifying ‘a firmly and calmly held boundary against abuse, whether emotional, spiritual, or physical’. While continuing to hold that hand up, the other hand is held out in front with palm facing up, signifying an openness and commitment to not imitating the other’s aggressive behaviour towards me.<sup>10</sup> And again, our capacity to hold this stance powerfully, non-reactively, non-aggressively is connected to our being sourced in the radical freedom of divine love.

However – and third – what happens if my ‘firmly and calmly held boundary’ is simply disregarded, as a Russian tank or white supremacist or persecuting authority bears down upon me and those around me? Am I then at liberty to use violent, perhaps even lethal means, to check another’s violence? Or does belonging to the Lamb slain mean that I must simply ‘endure’ what befalls, willing, if necessary, ‘to die in the Lord’ (Rev. 14.13), trusting that ultimately this non-retaliatory self-giving is part of the overcoming of evil by good?

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Llewellyn, “‘The Unveiling’: Reflections on the Book of Revelation as a Spiritual Adventure’, February 2017 (Printed by the York Community Resource Centre), p.108.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Wood, *Practicing Peace: Theology, Contemplation and Action* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), p.206.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Wood, *Practicing Peace*, p.207.

I'm not sure there's a universal answer to this question. There are times when the transforming power of Christ-like self-sacrifice seems clearly evident in the fruit that grows from the blood of the martyrs, from those who refuse to reciprocate violence and hatred – Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Stang. Yet perhaps there are other times when, as for Protestant pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was implicated in the plot to assassinate Hitler, what he calls truly 'responsible action', action truly responsive to particular circumstances, requires the willingness to make a different kind of sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> Not so much of one's life, but one's assurance of innocence. We can be caught in circumstances where there are no morally unambiguous options, where it seems as though evil acts must be stopped by any means possible. But if, perhaps like the people of Ukraine today, we find ourselves faced with this kind of tragic necessity, then I think our tradition holds that our *manner* of resistance must still be joined to the way of the Rider on the white horse, who is called 'Faithful and True', who judges and makes war in righteousness.

The profoundly difficult, almost offensive vision of the gospel means the refusal, whatever the circumstances, to give up on the possibilities and the power of good; it means the costly holding open of our hearts even to those who have done us evil in the radical hope that, in the end, all will be reconciled in the peace of God which passes all understanding. This is the way of suffering love, and in this way all of us are called to walk.

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<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Clifford Green et al (Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), p.268.