

on the contrary, the angels, together with John's brethren who are inspired by the spirit of prophecy, bear witness to Jesus, and in this regard, the angel is no more than a fellow servant with the saints in their relationship to Christ.

(2) The Coming of Christ (19:11-16).

The preceding pericope has announced the imminent marriage of the Lamb which assumes the return of Christ when the perfect union of Christ and his people will take place. This union—the marriage and the marriage feast—is nowhere described. John's new vision of the returning Christ emphasizes only one aspect of his coming: his victory over the powers of evil. This is a motif often developed in the Old Testament prophets; but in the prophets, it is usually Jahweh himself who marches forth to a victorious warfare to establish his reign over his enemies (Isa. 13:4; 31:4; Ezek. 38-39; Joel 3; Zech. 14:3). The most vivid prophetic picture is that of an unnamed conqueror who strides forth in crimsoned garments for vindication, who had trodden the wine press of God's wrath and stained his garments with his enemies' blood, who trod the hostile peoples in his wrath and established the day of vengeance (Isa. 63:1-6). John sees Christ coming as a conquering warrior in bloodstained garments, destroying all hostile and opposing powers with his mighty sword.

Some commentators hold that this portrayal of Christ contradicts the concept of the gracious and merciful Christ found in the rest of the New Testament. This simply is not true; everywhere in the New Testament the element of victory through judgment is an inescapable aspect of Christ's total work. (See Matt. 13:41-42; 25:41; Rom. 2:5; II Thess. 1:7; 2:8.)

While the Apocalypse employs symbolism to describe redemptive events and while this pericope is also filled with symbolism, it would violate the nature of apocalyptic language to spiritualize this passage to the point where it is taken to designate God's judicial acts in ordinary historical events. Apocalyptic symbolism in a passage like this, as in 6:12-17, represents what the apocalypticist felt would be real objective events in history—acts of God which transcend all ordinary historical experience. The second coming of Christ is an absolutely essential theme in New Testament theology. In his cross

and resurrection, Christ won a great victory over the powers of evil; by his second coming, he will execute that victory. Apart from his return to purge his creation of evil, redemption remains forever incomplete. As Hanns Lilje has written, "Those who believe in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ must also look for his return."<sup>3</sup>

Verse 11. **Then I saw heaven opened.** At the beginning of his prophecy John saw a door opened in heaven and was summoned into the heavenly realm to behold divine secrets. In the course of his visions, he saw the temple in heaven opened and the ark of the covenant disclosed to men (Rev. 11:19). What was suggested in these visions is now fulfilled as heaven is opened to make way for the triumphant coming of Messiah.

**And behold, a white horse!** The horse that rode forth when the first seal was broken (6:2) was white, and some interpreters identify the two. This, however, is highly unlikely. There can be no mistaking the identity of the rider of the present horse: he is "The Word of God" (vs. 13). White is a symbol of victory, and everywhere in the Revelation white is associated with the things of God and the divine victory. The white horse here represents Christ in his final victory over the evil powers which have oppressed the people of God throughout the course of the age.

**He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True.** These words were attributed to Christ in 3:14. The two words are practically synonymous in meaning, for the Hebrew idea of truth was not basically correspondence to reality as in Greek thought, but reliability. The "God of truth" (Jer. 10:10) is not the God who reveals eternal truth, but the God who can be trusted to keep his covenant. When John in his gospel wrote that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17), he meant that in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the faithfulness of God was revealed in fulfillment of his covenant. The return of Christ will be the reappearance of him who has already appeared among men to bring God's covenant promises to their final and full consummation.

**In righteousness he judges and makes war.** The present tense of the verbs indicates the permanent character of Messiah in all his acts. The great prophecy of the Davidic king de-

<sup>3</sup>Hanns Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955), p. 244.

scribed him as one who judges the poor with righteousness and decides with equity for the meek of the earth (Isa. 11:4). The return of Christ in victory over his enemies will be no act of personal vengefulness nor an arbitrary manifestation of divine power; it will be an act of righteousness reflecting the faithfulness of God, for the extirpation of evil is the negative side of the divine salvation.

Verse 12. **His eyes are like a flame of fire** (see 1:14). This represents the all-searching gaze of Christ. Human experience is full of mysteries and unresolved riddles; but the eyes of Christ search all things; nothing is hidden from his gaze.

**On his head are many diadems.** He wears the crown of royalty because he is the King of kings and Lord of lords (17:14). The coming of Christ will mean the public manifestation and the universal enforcement of the sovereignty which is already his by virtue of his death and resurrection. In his resurrection and ascension, he began his reign as Davidic king (Messiah) and Lord (Acts 2:36). He is even now the highly exalted Lord (Phil. 2:9), and he must reign as king until he has put all his enemies under his feet (I Cor. 15:25). His messianic reign will be incomplete until he has destroyed "every rule and every authority and power" (I Cor. 15:24). While he is now reigning as Lord and King, great authority and power remain in the hands of evil. The triumph of Christ over all hostile powers is the meaning of his second coming which has already been announced: "Hallelujah! for the Lord our God the Almighty has begun his reign" (see note on 19:6).

**He has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself.** Christ has already been named "Faithful and True" (vs. 11), and again, "The Word of God" (vs. 13). That he also has a secret name means that the human mind cannot grasp the depth of his being.

Verse 13. The picture of the conquering Christ draws some of its substance from the vision in Isa. 63 of the conqueror who treads the wine press of God's wrath, whose garments are splashed with the life-blood of his foes. We must agree with the majority of modern commentators that the **robe dipped in blood** refers to garments bloodied from conflict and battle, not from Christ's own blood on the cross. The picture here is of Christ the warrior and conqueror of evil, not of Christ the redeemer. The objection is made that it cannot be the blood

of battle, for the battle has not yet been joined; Christ comes to battle. This objection overlooks the fluidity and symbolic nature of apocalyptic language. Christ can be pictured as the warrior even before the battle is joined.

The designation of Christ as **The Word of God** is a distinctive fact which binds the Revelation to the other Johannine writings (John 1:1; I John 1:1). To modern Christians "the Word of God" is primarily the Bible. In the New Testament, the Word of God is primarily the good news of the gospel, whether proclaimed by Jesus (Luke 5:1; 8:11; 11:28) or by the apostles (I Cor. 14:36; II Cor. 2:17; 4:2; I Thess. 2:13). Christ in his own person is the Word of God *par excellence* — the embodiment of God's total redemptive plan.

Verse 14. **The armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses.** It is possible that these hosts represent the saints, but it is more likely that they are the heavenly hosts of angels. The presence of angels on the apocalyptic day is a common feature in biblical thought. "The Lord your God will come, and all the holy ones with him" (Zech. 14:5). The Son of man at his coming will be accompanied by angels (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; I Thess. 3:13; II Thess. 1:7). The pure, white garb of the heavenly armies indicates that they share in Messiah's victory. However, nothing is said about their engagement in the conflict; this belongs to Messiah alone. They wear no armor and carry no weapons. As the Lamb, Christ is followed by the saints (17:14); as the heavenly Warrior, he is followed by the angels.

Verse 15. **From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.** The only weapon involved in the warfare is the word of Christ. This language looks back to Isa. 11:4: "And he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked." Here is a symbolic representation of victory by the power of a word which is impossible to be literally envisaged. The idea goes back to creation. God created the worlds by his word. He spoke and it was done. This creation was mediated through the living word, Christ (John 1:3; Heb. 1:2). The judgment on the old order will also be mediated through the word of Christ. Just how John visualized this victory is impossible to say. It is, however, certain that he expected actual objective events to occur which would transform

the structure of human society, purging out the evil. The idea of a literal battle with military weapons is of course impossible. The metaphor of a sword for the word of God is not unknown (Heb. 4:12). The radical spiritualization of this concept which sees a conflict of human ideologies in human history and the triumph of Christianity does not accord with the nature of apocalyptic thought.

**He will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.** This is a further allusion to Isa. 63:3, which we have already met in the vision of the grape harvest (14:19).

Verse 16. **On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.** Here is a fourth name given to the returning Christ. He is known to himself by his hidden name; he is known to the churches as the Faithful and True, the Word of God; he is known to the world as King of kings and Lord of lords. It is possible that the first connective *and* is expegetical, further defining the preceding phrase: on his robe, that is, where it covers the thigh. No reason is suggested as to why this name should actually be inscribed on his thigh. The name designates the absolute sovereignty of Christ. For the believer, this is already true (I Cor. 8:5-6); at Christ's return, it will become a reality acknowledged by all.

### (3) The Battle of Christ and Antichrist (19:17-21).

One of the major themes of the Revelation is the conflict between God and Satan, which manifests itself in history in the conflict between Christ and Antichrist. In the final sections describing the triumph of Christ, John first sets forth the triumph of Christ over Antichrist and his supporters, which is depicted in terms of a great battle, and then the triumph of Christ over Satan himself, which takes place in two stages: his binding in the abyss and his destruction in the lake of fire. The battle itself with Antichrist is not described; it is only affirmed. The victory over Antichrist necessarily includes a victory over the kings and nations of the earth who have given their support and allegiance to Antichrist. This is the battle of Armageddon, which has already been proleptically announced at the sounding of the sixth trumpet (16:12-16), when demonic spirits gathered the kings of the earth in allegiance to Antichrist "on

the great day of God the Almighty." The idiom with which John describes this great battle is drawn from Ezek. 39:17-20, where the final victory of God over the pagan nations, particularly against Gog, Meshech and Tubal, is described in terms of a sacrificial feast which God is preparing for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field when they shall eat flesh and drink blood, when "you shall be filled at my table with horses and riders, with mighty men and all kinds of warriors, says the Lord God" (Ezek. 39:20). Obviously this is a vivid, picturesque way of describing a great and decisive destruction of the enemies of God and cannot be taken literally.

Verse 17. John sees an angel standing in the sun where all the birds of the earth could see him. The angel cried out with a loud voice, summoning all the birds that fly in mid-heaven to gather together to partake of the great supper of God. This supper stands in contrast to the marriage supper of the Lamb to which the saints were invited. The supper is called the supper of God because, like the feast in Ezek. 39, it is given by God, provided by him.

Verse 18. The metaphor of a battle likened to a great feast is continued. As in Ezek. 39, the fare is the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great. It is obvious that in its context, "all men" designates those who have accepted the mark of the beast and have chosen allegiance to Antichrist rather than humble their hearts in response to the judgments of God which they have suffered and acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ. The details in the description are meant to designate the totality of the overthrow of evil and of evil men.

Verse 19. John now sees the forces of the enemy drawn up, apparently at Armageddon, to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army. At the head of these forces is the beast — Antichrist himself; and supporting him are the kings of the earth (16:14; 17:2, 18; 18:3).

Verse 20. One would expect some description of the battle with the kings of the earth, but instead, John turns at once to his main theme, the defeat of Antichrist. The defeat of the supporting kings is an altogether secondary feature. John merely states that the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet, and they were thrown alive into the lake of fire that

burns with brimstone. The lake of fire is Gehenna, although the word itself is not used in the Revelation. In the New Testament, Hades and Gehenna are clearly distinguished from each other, although the Authorized Version does not make this distinction clear. Hades is the intermediate state between death and the resurrection (Matt. 16:18; Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27) and is sometimes used synonymously with the grave (Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13). It is the equivalent of the Old Testament Sheol. For the Old Testament background for the idea of Gehenna, see the notes on 14:9-10. Because Ge Hinnom or the Valley of Hinnom was a place of human sacrifices, it came to be the hell of final punishment in apocalyptic literature (*Enoch* 27:1ff.; 54:1ff.; 56:3ff.; 90:26; *IV Ezra* 7:36; *Apoc. of Baruch* 59:10; 85:13). The fact that in the gospels hell is pictured not only as a place of fire but also as a place of darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) suggests that both descriptions use metaphorical language drawn from contemporary Judaism to describe final and irremedial judgment. It is also significant that in Paul's important passage about the man of lawlessness, he — the Antichrist — is not to be cast into the lake of fire but is to be slain by the breath of Messiah's mouth (II Thess. 2:8). Obviously this is metaphorical language describing complete destruction. The lake of fire appears again in 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8.

Verse 21. John now speaks in very concise form of the destruction of the armies of Antichrist, consisting of the kings of the earth and those who had been seduced by the false prophet to receive the mark of the beast and to worship its image (vs. 20). All he says is that they were **slain by the sword of him who sits upon his horse, the sword that issues from his mouth**. Just how John conceived of this slaughter being actually carried out, we cannot say. It is, however, certain that he means to indicate the actual destruction of the hosts of evil. He concludes by resuming the theme of the great supper: **all the birds were gorged with their flesh**. Some scholars find elements of universalism in the New Testament; this, however, can be done only when certain verses are taken out of their biblical context. The New Testament expects masses of men to remain unrepentant and obdurate in heart, who can anticipate nothing but the judgment and wrath of the Lamb.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### THE MESSIANIC TRIUMPH

Having related the destruction of Antichrist, John now relates the conquest and destruction of the beast's master — Satan himself. This takes place in two different stages. First, Satan is bound and shut up in the abyss; the first resurrection occurs and the resurrected saints join Christ in his messianic reign of a thousand years. At the end of this interim kingdom, Satan is loosed from his prison and finds the hearts of men over whom Christ has reigned to be still responsive to his enticements. He again deceives them and gathers them together for a second battle against Christ. After his defeat, Satan is cast into Gehenna where the beast and false prophet are; there follows (presumably) the second resurrection, for the dead stand before the throne of God in the final judgment. The wicked join Antichrist and Satan in Gehenna, and the righteous enter into the final state of blessedness in the new heaven and new earth.

The interpretation of this chapter has been a source of great debate and even conflict in the church. Systems of eschatology have often been identified in terms of the way they treat the question of the millennium — the thousand-year reign of Christ. A postmillennial view was popular among interpreters of the historical school, who saw in the Revelation a prophecy of the course of history down to the end. *Postmillennialism* means that the return of Christ would not occur until the Kingdom of God had been established by the church in human history. In this view, chapter 19 does not describe the coming