

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the terms and conditions of discipleship, which is fundamentally and unmistakably costly. Authentic disciples who faithfully follow the demands of Jesus as specified in the Gospel (Luke 14:27) and put loyalty to the one eternal God above the demands of the state will inevitably encounter opposition and conflict. They may even experience martyrdom; but for those whose uncompromising commitment to their Lord is not merely an “alternate reality” but the ultimate reality to whom all humanity is accountable, the promise is that faithfulness unto death will be rewarded with a crown of life (Rev 2:10).*

“Unless you take up your cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). While the book of Revelation does not specifically quote this saying of Jesus, it certainly does take up the spirit of his observation.

The Concept of Discipleship

The word “unless” makes it clear immediately that “terms and conditions apply.”¹ Let us, therefore, consider what they might be. First, it is of fundamental importance “to recognise that the call to take up one’s cross is a universal of Christian discipleship.”² It is a powerful and unmistakable symbol of conflict and suffering, which goes beyond the mere metaphorical, and may lead ultimately to martyrdom. Secondly, it requires that one should “follow Jesus,” which immediately raises questions (a) as to precisely what this means for the follower, in terms of the direction which his/her life should take, (b) about Jesus’ own identity, which he himself realised was a live issue (Matt 16:13), and (c) about how his followers are expected to

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¹ See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), 372ff, but especially 591-593.

² Grant Macaskill, “Monuments to Suffering in Heaven: Miroslav Volf, the Healing of Memory and Cruciform Identity” in *The Bible in Transmission* (Spring 2007), 5. Cf. the comment of Leon Morris, “Cross-bearing is of the essence of discipleship.” *The Gospel According to St Luke* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 236.

relate to Jesus and to God. Finally, there is the assertion that only those who fulfil the conditions of service required can be regarded as disciples. Although expressed negatively, the conditions become, for cross-bearers, followers, and witnesses, a test of their integrity and authenticity.

It should also be helpful to say something about the context in which Revelation was written, since context determines definition. Traditionally Revelation has been assumed to have been composed by John while in exile on the isle of Patmos (Rev 1:9), but the reasons for his “exile” are by no means certain.³ He may have been fleeing from persecution, or he may have been legally banished there, but it is also possible that his exile was a self-imposed seclusion, to enable him to receive, reflect on, and record his prophetic “revelation” or apocalyptic vision. What is clear is that John was unable to present his message to the church in person, and that his “revelation” was not a single, spontaneous ecstatic utterance, given in the white heat of inspiration when he was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day (Rev 1:10), but the carefully constructed product of sustained profound thought, worked out over a period of time.⁴

His book offers a robust critique of a world dominated by Roman power and ideology and calls on the Christian community to confront the religious, political, and economic idolatries of the time, and to participate in God’s purpose of gathering all nations into His Kingdom. As such it demonstrates a profound disconnection between the world as it is and the world as John believes it ought to be, thus bringing into sharp focus the conflicting claims of two irreconcilable ideologies, one political, and the other spiritual. John’s readers have to decide where their true loyalties lie.

The Concept of God

Our starting point has to be Richard Bauckham’s observation that “The theology of Revelation is highly theocentric. This, along with its distinctive doctrine of God, is its greatest contribution to New Testament theology.”⁵ John’s book is the product of a highly reflective consciousness of God,⁶ to whom his readers are expected to be committed.

³ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 19th printing, 2012), 4.

⁴ Cf. E. F. Scott, *The Book of Revelation* (London: S.C.M. Press, 3rd Edition, 1941), 59-60.

⁵ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 23.

⁶ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 24.

The key question at the heart of Revelation is, “Who is the true Lord of this world?”⁷ And a related one may be, “Who is on his side?” (cf. Exod 32:26). John’s answer to the former is twofold: the true Lord is God, who is revealed as the sovereign Creator, and whose purposes are accomplished by Jesus, the Lamb, who is the real conqueror. The claims of both God and of the Lamb clash with those of Rome, and the inevitable consequence of the resulting conflict is that evil rages, not because it is dominant, but because it is doomed.⁸

The key passage which develops Revelation’s distinctive doctrine of God is chapter 4:1-11, where John describes the heavenly throne-room. The image of the throne identifies God as the rightful ruler of all things, and shows that all things must be seen in relation to him. His dominion is based on his creative power, which is recognised in the chorus of praise in 4:11, and his reign is manifested in the harmony and integrity of creation.⁹

Discipleship as a Test of Authenticity and Faithfulness

For the writer of Revelation discipleship is a test of Christian identity. His book contains a sustained reflection on the sufferings of the Christian community and how they relate to a suffering God – a concept which in itself is highly problematic.¹⁰ The reader is constantly being challenged to identify who genuinely belongs to the Christian community, and to separate the authentic disciple of Christ from the insidious impostor. This is why John is at pains to point out that although his message has come to him from an angelic intermediary (1:1), it is ultimately to be traced back to Jesus Christ (1:1), whom he describes as “the faithful witness” (1:5). If Christ is the faithful witness *par excellence*, then his word is the only one that can be trusted; and so it is hardly surprising that the conflict between truth and falsehood should be such a prominent Johannine theme.

John was acutely aware of the problems of false teachers and false prophets within the church. No doubt he was mindful of the warnings of Jesus contained in the “Little

⁷ Craig R. Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire” in *Interpretation* (Vol 63) Jan 2009, 12, citing Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 58.

⁸ Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge,” 12-13.

⁹ Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge,” 12-13.

¹⁰ See Richard Bauckham, “‘Only the Suffering God can Help’: divine passibility in modern theology,” in *Themelios* 9.3 (April 1984), 6-12.

Apocalypse”¹¹ (Mark 13:22) concerning those who set out to deceive even the elect. That such individuals had already infiltrated the church is abundantly evident from the first of the letters to the seven churches – the Ephesians are commended for the way in which they have tested and exposed the claims of what 2 Cor 11:13 describes as “pseudo-apostles” (Rev 2:2). But these “false teachers” (who tend to be very hard to detect because they appear to be so plausible) were not discredited by their lack of cross-bearing, even if that is one of the acid tests of discipleship. Their undoing would appear to have been their doctrinal inconsistency.¹²

It is perhaps worth adding that the claims of false prophets (whom Revelation identifies as “the second beast”) who promote the imperial cult and encourage false worship (13:11, 16:13, 19:20)¹³ must be resisted, even if that resistance has fatal consequences.

But in Revelation things are rarely as they appear. The recurring claim, “I know...” in the seven letters (2:2, 2:9, 2:13, 2:19, 3:1, 3:8, 3:15) suggests initially that John regards Jesus (in whose name he speaks) as being much more discerning of the true condition of the churches than their own members. But perhaps we are missing the element of irony, as suggested by David R. Barr.¹⁴

The dangers of the infiltrated church are very real: not all of the churches addressed in Revelation had been as discerning as the Ephesians. Pergamum had been infected by those who held the teaching of Balaam as well as by the Nicolaitans (2:14-15); Thyatira was complacent in tolerating a false prophetess (nick-)named Jezebel (2:19), and there were obviously deceivers in the church at Philadelphia (3:9). But the phenomenon has not been confined to New Testament times. One thinks of how the Nazis undermined the church in pre-war Germany, how the Stasi did the same in East Germany during the Cold War era, and of how the leadership

¹¹ For this term, see, e.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 387ff; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (London: Inter-Varsity Press), 1973, 139ff; and James Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T Clark, Ltd., 1918), 207-209.

¹² See G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999) 229-230. Beale cites 1 Thess 5:19-21, 1 John 4:1-3 and from extra-canonical sources, *Didache* 11:1-12:1 in support. Some of the tests applied in the *Didache* are naïve and simplistic in the extreme.

¹³ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 38.

¹⁴ David R. Barr, “John’s Ironic Empire” in *Interpretation* (Vol 63), January 2009, 27. E. F. Scott had previously noted that “a vein of terrible irony runs through the book of Revelation” as long ago as 1939. (E. F. Scott, *Revelation*, 186).

of the Orthodox Church was (and continues to be) distrusted for its complicity with the Russian authorities.

Discipleship as Sacrifice

Given that Revelation is set within the context of seven prominent cities, the question of appropriate civic engagement must have raised questions of conscience for Christians. Barr¹⁵ and Koester¹⁶ both point out how all-pervasive the imperial cult and the civic polytheism were. While no coercion to cooperate appears to have been involved,¹⁷ Christians who refused to do so were viewed with suspicion at best and hostility at worst (as at Smyrna and Pergamum).¹⁸ An additional problem for those who aspired to wealth (which set the tone for society as a whole) was that affluence tends to breed complacency. Nowhere was this more evident than at Laodicea, where the church was most sharply rebuked (Rev 3:17-19). As Koester remarks, “For these Christians the problem is not that social conditions are too threatening. Instead, the issue is that life is so comfortable that it has diminished the vitality of their faith.”¹⁹ They have forgotten that “The essence of discipleship is self-sacrifice.”²⁰ But warnings about wealth are nothing new. Luke 18:24-25 springs immediately to mind.²¹ Revelation 17-18 describes in graphic detail the injustices of an economic system that allowed the empire to flourish by the most ruthless of means. How could Christians dissociate themselves from an economic system that was commercially successful but morally corrupt and spiritually bankrupt without making considerable personal sacrifices?

Conflict and Victory.

Throughout Revelation there is a strong emphasis on “overcoming”. The expression, “He who conquers” or “to him who conquers” is found in all of the letters to the seven churches: 2:7b, 2:11b, 2:17b, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21. But who or what is conquered is left vague.²² What it is to conquer only becomes clear from the rest of the book, but we may summarise by saying

¹⁵ Barr, “John’s Ironic Empire,” 22-23.

¹⁶ Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge,” 7-9.

¹⁷ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 3rd Edition, 1965), I, 20.

¹⁸ Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge,” 7.

¹⁹ Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge,” 9.

²⁰ W. R. F. Browning, *The Gospel According to Saint Luke* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), 129.

²¹ See also the comments made by Marshall, *Luke*, 686-688.

²² Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 14.

that it is a call to engage in an eschatological battle in order to reach an eschatological destiny.²³ If this is understood as God's cosmic struggle against evil in order to establish his kingdom, then the question of cross-bearing makes perfect sense. To take up one's cross is to identify with that cause, and to demonstrate solidarity with the oppressed.

It has been said that Revelation "is a book that considers the suffering and evil experienced by God's people and how they are to respond to it, in the light of the heavenly and eschatological reality that has been revealed to them."²⁴ The true Christian response, it is claimed, is "to make that suffering part of our cruciform identity in Christ".²⁵ If a true reading of Revelation 5 compels us to reinterpret the concept of victory by confounding our expectations as to the identity of the victor, then it must follow that the cross becomes the great paradigm which informs our understanding of the outcome of that cosmic struggle.

Those who have been tortured, terrorised, and tyrannised by an "evil empire" can therefore place their hope in an alternate reality that will ultimately prove stronger. This cannot be dismissed as mere wishful thinking; John is not blind to the severity of the church's pain or the depths of its despair. Yet to the plea of the martyrs recorded in Rev 6:10 God does not give a direct answer. Instead he tells them to wait a little longer, and awards them a white robe – an image which recurs at 7:14.

But there is still worse to come; and it is not until we reach Chapter 14 that we see the perseverance of the saints properly rewarded.

There John calls attention to "those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev 14:4b). This comes from a densely packed passage, which raises more issues than it resolves. But at the very least it conveys a message of hope to those who have been consistently faithful and obedient. Their redemption is ensured, and their destiny is affirmed.

The true disciples are commended for not having compromised the Message of the Cross, and for not having collaborated with the guile of anti-Christian prostituting the communal good to the service of godless pride and its desire for world domination.²⁶ They have not been defiled by the polluting influence of the world, but have imitated Jesus'

²³ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 14.

²⁴ Macaskill, "Monuments to Suffering," 2.

²⁵ Macaskill, "Monuments to Suffering," 2.

²⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1960), 115.

faithfulness in the midst of suffering and persecution.²⁷ But as in the Gospels and the Pauline literature, the idea of “following Christ” is not limited to martyrdom, but entails a wider scope of suffering in general for the sake of commitment to Him.²⁸

Two other points are worth noting: firstly, Rev 14:4b says something about the nature of the relationship between the Lamb and his followers, and secondly, about the nature of the relationship between the Lamb and God.

With regard to the first point, it is significant that the redeemed do not and cannot dictate where their service will take them. It is for the Lamb to lead, and for the redeemed to follow.²⁹ They are the Lamb’s special possession, and are consecrated to God’s service, just like the firstfruits of the harvest, which are dedicated and considered to be holy (cf. Exod 23:19, Neh 10:35, Prov 3:9). Beale sees this thought as a development of the idea that Christians are to be understood as “sacrifices to the Lord” and as an expression of His sovereignty and ownership.³⁰ G. B. Caird, noting the military allusions of Rev 14:4a, likens the martyrs to good soldiers of the Cross, whose obedience cannot be questioned, and says that the best commentary on this verse is the saying of Jesus to Peter in the Fourth Gospel (John 13:36).³¹

Beale goes on to say that “Because genuinely redeemed saints follow the Lamb, they take on the Lamb’s attributes...(and) take on the portrayal of having been slain to connote their Christlike suffering.”³² The sacrificial nature of Christian witness is reinforced by a further allusion to Isa 53:9; like Jesus, the saints are “faithful witnesses” in whose mouths no lies or deceit can be found.

As for the relationship between the Lamb and God, this perhaps recalls the comment in John 1:29 concerning his redemptive (and salvific) purpose in taking away the sin of the world.³³ It is a profoundly subversive notion that God should use a vulnerable and defenceless

²⁷ Beale, *Revelation*, 741.

²⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 741. Beale also calls attention to Rev 6:9 and 12:1.

²⁹ Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969, reprinted 1976), 177.

³⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 742.

³¹ George B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (London: A. & C. Black, 2nd Edition, 1984), 179.

³² Beale, *Revelation*, 745.

³³ Torrance appears to make this connection in *The Apocalypse Today*, 45ff.

lamb³⁴ rather than the expected powerful lion to accomplish His purpose, but entirely in keeping with the spirit of 1 Cor 1:27-29.

Whether Bauckham's interpretation of the Lamb's atoning work described in Revelation 5:9 as applying only to a remnant is in any way "implausible" as suggested by Beale, I cannot say for certain.³⁵ However, that passage does appear to assert that redemption is absolute and complete in an eschatological sense.³⁶ Not all commentators agree.³⁷ Nevertheless, I am persuaded by the views articulated by Bauckham stressing the importance of its high Christology for the message of Revelation, in that it makes clear that "what Christ does, God does. Since Christ shares the one eternal being of God, what Christ is said to do, in salvation and judgment, is no less truly and directly divine than what is said to be done by 'the One who sits on the throne'."³⁸

Bauckham concludes by saying that

if God is not present in this world as 'the One who sits upon the throne' he *is* present as the Lamb who conquers by suffering. Christ's suffering witness and sacrificial death are...the key event in God's conquest of evil and establishment of his kingdom on earth. ...God is related to the world not only as the transcendent holy One, but also as the slaughtered Lamb.³⁹

Conclusions

For John, "discipleship" undoubtedly means cross-bearing, following, and witnessing. It means unmasking the deception of false worship, exposing the demonic dangers of the

³⁴ Pace Barr ("John's Ironic Empire," 28), one should perhaps be careful not to make too much of John's use of the diminutive *arnion* for "lamb". See the definition of the word given by Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943), 37.

³⁵ Beale, *Revelation*, 745. I have not had access to Bauckham's *Climax of Prophecy* which Beale criticises, along with the opinions of G. B. Caird. However, I have had access to Caird, whose view expressed on page 77 of his commentary that "the redemption of men (*sic*) from every tribe, tongue, people, and race is far from being the whole story of Christ's work of atonement as John understands it" seems to meet with Beale's disapproval.

³⁶ As well as Beale's comments in *Revelation*, 362, referring to the use of the Daniel 7 formula of universality, see also Morris's comments in *Revelation*, 99-101, and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2001), 212-3.

³⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 213 appears to concur with Morris and Beale, as do Ronald H. Preston and Anthony T. Hanson, *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 76-77. However, Martin Kiddle and M. K. Ross, *The Revelation of St John* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940), 103-104 appear to side with Caird.

³⁸ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 63.

³⁹ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 64-65. Torrance comments that "It is through this earthly historical Church that the Lamb of God gains a purchase upon history and exerts His redeeming power among the nations." *Apocalypse Today*, 22.

imperial cult,⁴⁰ resisting the seductive temptations associated with civic engagement,⁴¹ challenging “the seamy side of commerce” and the complacency that comes from affluence,⁴² opposing the deification of human power, and expressing unwavering loyalty to God whose moral authority is absolute,⁴³ and who demands “our soul, our life, our all”. That may for some lead inevitably to martyrdom. But for the true disciple’s commitment to the Lord who is not just an “alternate reality” but the *ultimate* reality, the most reassuring message that Revelation can impart is “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life.” (2:10).

⁴⁰ Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge,” 16.

⁴¹ Barr, “John’s Ironic Empire,” 22-24.

⁴² Koester, “Revelation’s Visionary Challenge,” 16-18.

⁴³ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 39.

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