

THE DEPICTION OF GOD IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION: HOW MIGHT IT CONTRIBUTE TO A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO EVIL AND SUFFERING?*

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***Abstract:** Revelation's portrayal of God as the almighty, fully in charge and waiting to avenge the evil perpetrated through the ages, and of Jesus as the slaughtered Lamb who conquered through suffering have huge implications for the way Christians respond to the problems of evil and suffering. Relentlessly Revelation enjoins believers to overcome through perseverance, suffering and even death. Thus, Revelation presentation corrects the false view that victory is the absence of suffering so that Christians may cease to employ such yardsticks to measure victory.*

The doctrine of divine suffering postulates that by his sacrificial death, Christ identifies with human suffering and by his resurrection, he gives hope of God's emancipation from suffering. The cross depicts a God who because of his love "willingly undertakes to suffer with and for those he loves,"¹ even though his weakness is "stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:25). Revelation employs the imageries of the lamb that was slain and martyrs, both testaments to suffering. John, who received the vision, was himself a "companion in tribulation" (Rev 1:9). He disclosed at the beginning of the book of Revelation that he was on the island of Patmos suffering on account of God's word and the testimony of Jesus. The book, while considering "the suffering and evil experienced by God's people,"² encourages perseverance in the face of persecution and examines the reward for overcomers. In this article, I will discuss how the depiction of God in the book of Revelation contributes to a Christian response to the problems of evil and suffering. To do this effectively, I will first examine the depiction of God and Jesus Christ in Revelation. The article argues that the depiction of God and Jesus as the almighty, fully in charge and waiting to avenge the evil perpetrated through the ages, and the

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¹ Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can help': Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Themelios*, 9: 3 (1984).

² Macaskill Grant, "Monuments to Suffering in Heaven: Miroslav Volf, The Healing of Memory and Cruciform Identity," *The Bible in Transmission*, publication of British and Foreign Bible Society, Spring 2007. accessed September 24, available at <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk>.

numerous injunctions to overcome through perseverance, suffering and even death, together have huge implications for the way Christians respond to the problems of evil and suffering.

The depiction of God in Revelation

Being theocentric, Revelation has a “distinctive doctrine of God.”³ In the first chapter of Revelation, God declares himself as the “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending,” the one “which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty” (Rev 1:8). The self-designation of God as the first and the last in Revelation echoes similar declarations in the book of Isaiah (41:4; 44:6 & 48:12). Bauckham observes that such designation “encapsulates the understanding of the God of Israel as the sole creator of all things and the sovereign Lord of history... Unlike human-made gods, this God is the utterly incomparable One, to whom all nations are subject, whose purpose none can frustrate.”⁴ In the same way, God’s designation as the almighty indicates “Yahweh’s unrivalled power over all things and therefore his supremacy over the course of historical events.”⁵ Lending emphasis to God’s sovereignty is the frequency of the mention of God’s throne, which is a central symbol in the book of Revelation. John’s vision of God’s throne-room (Rev 4) details God’s heavenly sovereignty. Bauckham observes that John’s vision, like other apocalyptic visions of God’s throne “does not dwell on the visible form of the One who sits on the throne... The unknowable transcendence of God is protected by focusing instead on the throne itself and what goes on around it.”⁶ The reader is drawn into a scene of continuous worship of God by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. Their song and hymn of worship, according to Bauckham “express the two most primary forms of awareness of God: the awed perception of his numinous holiness... and the consciousness of utter dependence on God for existence itself that is the nature of all created.”⁷ The book of Revelation employs very powerful imagery not only to portray a power superior to the then-dominant Roman Empire, but also a power superior to all the dictators through the ages. John’s vision reemphasises and brings into the limelight a clearer picture of God’s supremacy and ultimate intentions and gives a broader picture than has been touched on in other parts of Scripture.

God is depicted as the creator of all things; to him all things owe their existence and worship. He made all things for his own pleasure (Rev 4:11). As the creator of the present life that ends in death,

³Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 23

⁴ *Ibid*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid*, 30.

⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

⁷ *Ibid*, 32-33.

God can also give life that is eternal. He created the present age which will pass away, and he is able to create the new eternal age, hence his declaration that he makes all things new (Rev 21:5). All the worship therefore belongs to God as the angel indicates, calling all to worship God (Rev 14:17). Putting it succinctly, Bauckham observes that “the first creation, by its nature, lapses back into nothing. It requires a fresh creative act of God to give it ... a quite new form of existence, taken beyond all threat of evil and destruction.”⁸ God is seen in Revelation destroying the power of evil and establishing his kingdom on earth. He uses three sets of judgements with increasing severity beginning with the seven seal-openings, which affect a quarter of the earth (Rev 6), then the seven trumpets, which affect a third (Rev 8 & 9), and finally the seven bowls which affect an unlimited number of people (Rev 15 & 16). The judgements were commissioned by the living creatures and carried out by angels so that God was not directly pronouncing the judgements. Bauckham notes that the depiction of God’s sovereignty in Revelation is vastly different from the demonstration of power and authority by human rulers. So God’s judgement is portrayed very differently from a “human despot wielding arbitrary power” because “absolute power on earth is demonic in inspiration, destructive in effects, idolatrous in its claim to ultimate loyalty.”⁹ However, in spite of the indirectness employed, God’s power and glory are revealed through thunderstorms, smoke and earthquakes (Rev 15:8 & 16:18).

Like the depiction of God, the image of Jesus Christ in Revelation is one of authority and splendour. Jesus was the word by which all things were created (Rev 3:14, John 1:1-3). He is introduced as the Lamb “the one who is to bring God’s rule into effect on earth.”¹⁰ The sound of his voice was to John like the sound of many waters, his appearance exuded so much majesty and power that John was overwhelmed and “fell at his feet as dead” (Rev 1:17). John heard “a great voice, as of a trumpet” depicting the speaker’s authority and similar to the terrifying voice of the trumpet in Exodus 19, which caused the Israelites to tremble when they heard it. He saw “one like unto the Son of man” (Rev 1:13), resonating Daniel’s vision of the four beasts, in which the son of man was given an “everlasting dominion” (Dan 7:14), and had an indestructible kingdom. Jesus is portrayed in Revelation as the “faithful witness” and “the prince of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5). He is depicted as standing in the midst of the Churches with authority, knowing fully their works, trials and tribulations, with them in their sufferings. The images depict him with a sharp two-edged sword in his

⁸ Ibid, 49.

⁹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁰ Ibid, 32.

mouth, showing his power and effulgence (Rev 1: 15-16); he is therefore able to punish evil and cast evil doers “into great tribulation” (Rev 2:22). Christ participates in God’s divine Lordship, having won “the keys of hell and of death” as well as the key of David (Rev 1:18). His death is central to the account of Revelation, he is able to reward overcomers and give them “power over the nations” (Rev 22:26). His immense power is demonstrated in Revelation 19 when we see him as the warrior king sitting on a white horse and accompanied by heavenly armies on white horses and dressed in fine linen. He was able to execute judgement on the beast and the false prophet, assaulting the kingdom of darkness. But Jesus won at first through suffering as a sacrificial lamb. Bauckham notes that “his eternal livingness was interrupted by the experience of a human death, and he shares the eternal life of God through triumph over death.”¹¹ Consequently, God is connected to humanity as the “transcendent holy One” and as the “slaughtered Lamb.”¹²

How the Depiction of God in Revelation Contributes to a Christian response to suffering and evil

Suffering is a reoccurring theme in Revelation as the book presents the slain lamb as the lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5). This lamb was totally victorious not by a display of might and power in a worldly sense but by his suffering and death. The Christian is enjoined in different passages to endure suffering but also to remember those who suffer (e.g., Heb 13.3). Revelation depicts a deeper meaning or reconstruction of victory from God’s perspective which is different from human expectations. The letters to the churches repeatedly call for believers to overcome just as Christ overcame through suffering and death, so as to sit on the throne as he sits on the throne (Rev 3:21). The believer, who sees as erroneous the human understanding that victory is the absence of suffering, ceases to employ such yardsticks to measure victory. Gaining victory by sacrificial death therefore gives a general sense that suffering and evil do not have the final say. God is in control of the big picture and believers are encouraged to persevere and overcome till the end, in order to gain the overcomer’s reward. From the depiction of God in Revelation, the believer sees evil and suffering as things that will ultimately be defeated and eradicated. The martyrs’ participation in suffering and death (Rev 6-7 & 14) gained them a white robe and an identity as the pure ones. Also, the two witnesses, in spite of the authority they demonstrated, suffered attack and death (Rev 11.7). They were effective in turning many unto righteousness and were faithful unto death. Consequently, as Macaskill observes, “the cross subverts

¹¹ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 56.

¹² *Ibid*, 65.

all assumptions as to what victory or success should look like and how they will come to pass.”¹³ Revelation’s depiction of God’s power to punish unrighteousness challenges Christians to appropriately respond to evil and suffering through separation from evil, perseverance in witness, and pressing on for victory even unto death.

The depiction of God in Revelation as the Alpha and the Omega is very important in the believer’s response to the problem of evil and suffering as it confirms and demonstrates that God “precedes all things, as their creator, and he will bring all things to eschatological fulfilment.”¹⁴ Consequently, the believer sees a God that is actively in charge of his world in spite of the prevalent evil and suffering. God “has the first word, in creation, and the last word, in new creation.”¹⁵ Revelation demonstrates to the believer the wrath of God against evil and wickedness. There are bowls of God’s wrath (Rev 15:17) confirming that God is angry with the wicked always (Psalm 7:11). The Christian, with this picture in mind, responds boldly against evil and wickedness, by refusing to partake in them and by being a witness for God. God’s heavenly sovereignty as shown in Revelation enlarges the perspective of believers “on their own situation by setting it within the broader context of God’s universal purpose of overcoming all opposition to his rule and establishing his kingdom in the world.”¹⁶ John’s vision of God’s supremacy is for believers the ultimate reality which will eventually prevail on earth, and the evil powers parading themselves and challenging God’s rule presently are seen as shadows and temporary. The portrayal of Jesus standing in the midst of the Church seeing their tribulations, commending their victories and urging them to persevere until God comes, not only in salvation but also in judgement, gives the believer the encouragement and boldness to respond adequately to evil and suffering in daily experience. With the declaration of God’s eschatological purpose for creation, the believer sees evil and suffering from a different light: they are to be endured and conquered through resistance even unto death. The revelation of Jesus as the lion and the lamb buttresses the fact that God is almighty but that his thoughts and ways are different from those of humanity (Isaiah 55: 8-9). Consequently, through suffering and death victory is won, not initially through conquest in a military sense, again pointing to the fact that the battle is not just a physical one (Eph 6:12).

¹³ Macaskill, “Monuments to Suffering in Heaven,” 12.

¹⁴ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

The depiction of God in Revelation contributes to a Christian response to suffering and evil by complementing the account of the apostles in the New Testament. Revelation's presentation also confirms and strengthens Old Testament accounts. Although his right hand is gloriously powerful and can effectively destroy the enemy (Exod 15:6) yet Jesus learnt obedience by the things he suffered (Heb 5:8). After his suffering, Jesus left the believers an example to follow his steps (1 Pet 2:21). The benefit of Jesus' injunction for his followers to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him (Matt 16:24, Mark 8:34) and Paul's assertion that through much tribulations believers will enter the kingdom of God if they continue in the faith (Acts 14:22) are all elaborated in Revelation. Hebrews 11 is a catalogue of sufferings and victories, and the fact that believers are "compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) is made much clearer in the depiction of God's final plans in Revelation. Also, in the Old Testament there were accounts of sufferings, evils and victories. For instance, Daniel's experience in the lion's den (Dan 6:1-28) and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's experience in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace (Dan 3: 1-30) are examples of bold separation, persistent witness and victories; the sort of response that Revelation elicits. Job's suffering also brought him greater weight of glory. These responses agree with the account in Revelation and help to strengthen the Christian's response to evil and suffering.

Bauckham suggests that the "most elemental forms of perception of God not only require expression in worship: they cannot be truly experienced except as worship."¹⁷ Believers join the living creatures and elders in heaven in their continual worship of God in spite of the present suffering as exemplified by Paul and Silas who sang and praised God in prison (Acts 16:16-40). God is worshipped in heaven as the source of all authority. The worship of God is the true worship while the worship of the beast is false worship. True and false worship as portrayed in Revelation speaks to the power-structure in the contemporary world. Bauckham notes that Revelation is "about the incompatibility of the exclusive monotheistic worship portrayed in chapter 4 with every kind of idolatry – the political, social and economic idolatries from which more narrowly religious idolatry is inseparable."¹⁸ The worship of power and giving to others the loyalty that is due to God are some of the issues Christians have resisted over time and are still resisting in the contemporary world. The depiction of God in Revelation encourages believers to come out from the world's idolatrous system and be separate (Rev 18:4). The numerous injunctions to believers to persevere (e.g., Matt 24:13, Rev 2:10) and overcome

¹⁷ Ibid, 33.

¹⁸ Ibid, 35.

(e.g., Rev 2:26, Rev 3:21) contribute to their response to disassociate from the evil systems of the world in order to be true witnesses for God, a separation which is bound to engender persecution (1 Pet 4:4). The letters to the Churches (Rev 2-3) portray the persecutions and evils to which the Church was then exposed and from which it still suffers as well as the need to continue to choose to serve God. There is a continual urging of believers to overcome and promised rewards for overcomers. God's righteous rule (Rev 4, Heb 1:8-9) is in contrast to the exploitative and oppressive rule of not just the Roman Empire but empires and rulers through the ages. For while Jesus Christ, "the Ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5) loves righteousness and hates wickedness, the kings and merchants of the earth love oppression and trade with the souls of men (Rev 18: 9-13). Because of the supremacy of God, believers have faith that unjust rulers in the past, present and future will not rule indefinitely. God's righteousness and holiness requires the punishment of evil and unrighteousness on earth.

The believer also responds to evil through prayer asking that God's sovereign will, which is already acknowledged in heaven (Rev 4), will be done on earth as Jesus taught his followers in the Lord's prayer (Matt 6:9-13). Bauckham notes that, "John is taken up into heaven to see that God's throne is the ultimate reality behind all earthly appearances."¹⁹ The fact that evil and suffering abound and flourish in the world might indicate to some that no one is in charge. But to the Christian the portrayal of the events in Revelation and the depiction of God confirm Peter's assertion that God "knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment" (2 Pet 2:9). The seemingly invincible evil powers in the world can only operate until God's appointed time. Revelation thus presents a hope that evil will not thrive forever and the perpetrators of evil and suffering will be justly punished. The Christian therefore sees evil and suffering not as a perpetual experience and looks forward to a time when suffering and evil will be no more.

While the portrayal of God in Revelation is a solace for Christians, groups such as feminist theologians criticise God's image as a sovereign ruler and judge, considering it as a projection of "religious sanction for authoritarian structures of power and domination in human society."²⁰ Bauckham argues that divine sovereignty actually delegitimizes human autocracy, because when God's absolute power is acknowledged, other human powers become relative. Also, the image of God's sovereignty expresses aspects of God's unique relationship as the creator with his creatures and should not be a model of human behavior or relationships between rulers and their subjects because

¹⁹ Ibid, 31.

²⁰ Ibid, 44.

“God transcends all creaturely existence. As the source, ground and goal of all creaturely existence, the infinite mystery on which all finite being depends, his relationship to us is unique.”²¹

Conclusion

The pictures of God and Jesus as painted in Revelation show the authority of God and how he is in charge. Christ’s sovereign authority and control over the Church and God’s sovereign control over the world is clearly painted in Revelation. While emphasising his eternal nature as the Alpha and Omega, the first and last, (Rev 1:11) Jesus points out that he was dead but now lives for evermore (Rev 1:18). So the Christian draws confidence from these depictions and responds appropriately to evil and suffering that arise from persecution. The Christian responds through perseverance in witness, turning away from evil and conquering even through death, knowing that Jesus has powers over death and will avenge their suffering at the right time. The depiction of the slain Lamb in Revelation effectively corrects the false view that victory is the absence of suffering so that the Christian may cease to employ such yardsticks to measure victory.

²¹ Ibid, 45.

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