

## All People Praise God

Revelation 7:9-17

November 7, 2021

Today we make a dramatic leap forward from *Psalms* to the *Revelation of John*. *The Revelation* seems to have been written towards the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who reigned A.D. 81-96. Domitian followed his father Vespasian and brother Titus as emperor. Vespasian and Titus were competent emperors. It was during their time that the first Jewish revolt was suppressed and Jerusalem destroyed in 70 A.D. Both were worshipped as gods, but certainly Vespasian didn't take that very seriously. He even joked about it on his deathbed. Neither he nor his son Titus instituted persecutions of Christians or Jews for religious reasons. But, Domitian was something else.

Domitian got the title of emperor because of being Vespasian's son, not because he had done anything particularly worthy. Vespasian and Titus had won the Jewish war and had enriched Rome with the treasures of the temple. Domitian had not done much of anything. The Emperorship was not supposed to be a matter of heredity. It was only the Army's loyalty to Vespasian that led to this unworthy son succeeding his favored brother as emperor. Domitian understood the situation. He compensated by insisting on his status as a god be carried to extremes for personal as well as political reasons. He commanded public sacrifices and allegiance to his genius. His household was required to address him as, "our Lord and God," and "Most Sacred Emperor," and even as "Jupiter." That last even usurped the position of the greatest god of the Greco-Roman pantheon.

A consequence of this self-elevation was an insistence on being worshipped by everyone in the empire. Historically, the Jews were given a pass on that, since they obstinately refused to worship anyone other than their own ethnic god, as it was seen by the Romans. Jews were too widespread and useful to be worth persecuting and killing for not conforming. But, that status was in danger in the time of Domitian. That is supposed to be the reason the historian Josephus wrote his book, *Antiquities of the Jews*, in A.D. 93. In 95, Domitian executed his cousin Clemens and others for adopting a "Jewish" mode of life, as well as punishing yet others. The Jews managed to preserve their protected status. They officially declared, at the Council of Jamnia, A.D. 90, that Christians were not Jews. From that time, Christians, by then mostly Gentiles, could not claim a right to be excused from emperor worship, even though they considered themselves the "New Israel."

*The Revelation*, as well as the rest of the Johannine literature in the *Bible*, addresses this situation. Under threat of persecution and death, some Christians sought accommodation to both fulfill the requirement to worship the emperor and remain members of the Christian community, the Church. John, and the Church in general, would not allow that. If you were a true worshiper of God, and Jesus, you could not also declare that the emperor was God. The persecution of Christians was not confined to Rome, but also occurred in the Eastern empire, the region around Asia Minor where John was. Many were martyred. Others forsook Christianity.

The book *The Revelation* is an apocalypse, a transliteration of a Greek word meaning “revelation” or “vision.” The term always is used of writings concerning the “end times.” There was a conception that this present “age” would ultimately end with the Great and Terrible Day of the Lord, and a new “age” would be ushered in in which God’s reign would displace all evil and wickedness. Some writings see this as all taking place on earth, with the current reign of evil on earth cleansed away. Other writings see the age to come as elsewhere, after the earth as we know it is destroyed. Other apocalyptic writings occur in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Amos, and even in Matthew 24:3-44. The term is not just for Biblical texts; other apocalypses were in circulation about the same time and earlier. The term “apocalyptic” should not be used for prophecies having to do with the present age. Sometimes the distinction seems blurred. For example, Joel 2:30 to 3:3, which has apocalyptic language and imagery, seems to anticipate the restoration of Israel, perhaps in the present age.

*The Revelation of John* begins with John’s vision of the risen Jesus beginning in verse 1:10. He is given messages for seven churches in the province of “Asia,” in the vicinity of Ephesus (to the end of Chapter 3). In Chapter 4, John is taken in spirit up to a vision of Heaven, before the throne of God, where he witnesses the heavenly worship.

In Chapter 5 God has a scroll. The question is, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals?” The Lamb, appearing as it had been slain, is found worthy. This is the scene rendered in music by the final great chorus of Handel’s *Messiah*.

Then, as the seals are broken, the Four Horsemen appear and the end of the age begins. At the fifth seal, the martyrs appear, praying for justice and vengeance. They are told to wait a little longer; there are others yet to be added to their number.

At the sixth seal, there are earthquakes, the Sun becomes black, and the stars fall. The dire state of things is apparent to everyone remaining on earth. Four angels at the corners of the earth wait for the signal to unleash the winds of destruction. They are told, “Not yet.” The total of 144,000 “sealed” servants of God need to be numbered, 12,000 of (or representing) each tribe (of Israel). That brings us to Chapter 7, verse 9:

### **The Multitude from Every Nation**

**<sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup> They cried out in a loud voice, saying,**

**“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”**

**<sup>11</sup> And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, <sup>12</sup> singing,**

**“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”**

**<sup>13</sup> Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” <sup>14</sup> I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.**

**<sup>15</sup> For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship him day and night within his temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.**

**<sup>16</sup> They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;**

**<sup>17</sup> for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,**

**and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

Notice the universal origins of the uncountable multitude. “From all tribes and people and languages.” I read this as meaning, “not just the 144,000.” I believe it is the Jehovah’s Witnesses that believe, from *The Revelation*, that only 144,000 will be saved. That is a countable number. So, who are the uncountable people in the white robes?

Interestingly, that’s exactly the question the angel asks John. I can’t help but chuckle a bit to myself when I read this. Things that come to my mind are, “*You* are asking *me*?” Or, “God knows!” John makes a similar, more polite, response. He says, “**Sir, you are the one that knows.**” In other words, “I don’t know.”

This provides the occasion for the angel to deliver verses 14 to 17. This may have been a “martyrological hymn” sung to prepare those expecting to be martyred for their coming ordeal of arrest, trial, sufferings, and death. II Timothy 2:11-13 may be another such hymn. These of the multitude have endured the “great tribulation” (“ordeal” in NRSV) and are now enjoying life beyond with God. Further details are added later in *The Revelation*, but the central message is here. The John’s readers, he is conveying that they must endure, stay faithful to Jesus and to God, and endure but a little while longer. God will be there for them, and they, too, will join this multitude.

I’d like to point out a few details. First, verse 14 really should have been placed in a poetic frame along with 15-17; it’s part of the same hymn. It is the “blood of the Lamb” which had made their robes (and them) clean of sin and anything that would offend God. It’s a contradiction of reality that blood would clean robes to white. To the Jews, blood represented life. That is the reason for the kosher laws. It was inappropriate to consume the “life” of an animal with its flesh. The life of the animal belongs to God. The life of Jesus was poured out for all of us, all of humanity, this great multitude, in the crucifixion. That life poured out cleanses us of sin. Yes, real blood would make a mess of clothing. But the symbolism of blood as equating to life makes sense. A second inversion of logic occurs later in verse 17. The Lamb becomes our shepherd. Shepherd literally means “sheep herder,” but now the Lamb is our shepherd. I am reminded of Jesus’s words, “**The last shall be first and the first last.**” (Matt.20:16) With God, amazing things are possible that defy our earthly logic.

In the Roman context, white was a color associated with victory. The great multitude is not battered and weary from their ordeal. They are victorious and celebrating! The palm branches are also a symbol of victory. Recall the palm branches laid before Jesus on Palm Sunday, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The people shouted “Hosanna!” a cry of praise to God, on that occasion. We now know that He would suffer a few days later, and in so doing achieve victory over death.

Verses 16 and 17 may sound very familiar. They very closely follow Isaiah 49:10. The voice of Psalm 23 seems to ring through these words as well.

What we see in *The Revelation*, at least as far as the imagery and message is concerned, is consistent with the Gospel and the *Old Testament* writings. Early in the second century, *The Revelation* was an important source of hope and comfort. It was considered then as a writing of John the Apostle. *The Revelation* was considered canonical by a church under persecution. Some of the heretical movements rejected *The Revelation* as not authoritative. In the Fourth Century, as persecution disappeared and the Church was getting organized, the Eastern Church often rejected the authority of *The Revelation*. Even elsewhere, there were those who said that *The Revelation* needed to be understood allegorically, or even with suspicion. But, ultimately, it was included in the canon, as it has come down to us since.

I think it is important to remember that this is a vision given to John about 100 A.D. He sees things like horsemen with swords. He understands the heavens with the perspective of a man of his own times. I think we need to assume that God has given him this vision in terms and images that he can understand. That doesn't include machines that fly or computers. We really are very limited also, just as John was, in things that we can comprehend. So, we can wonder at what we read, and ask God to help us understand what we need to know. The central message, however you read the details, is clear. God loves us and will care for us. We will be home with Him when our days in this age are done, and we will be happy there, whatever the details, and however it works. We don't have to understand all of those details to know what to do in the present: remain faithful, and be beacons of light to others.

Prayer: *Lord, open my heart and mind to the message of revelation so that my imagination of your will is enlightened and my relationship with you and my siblings in faith is deepened. Amen.*