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The CONQUERING CHRIST of the Apocalypse

By C. MERVYN MAXWELL

LAST AUTUMN I read the Book of Revelation (often called "The Apocalypse") in the famous Moffatt translation.

Moffatt has a penchant for graphic words. Under his hand the Lord of the Old Testament is not "my Rock" but "my Crag"; and the Book of Numbers does not say that "the wrath of the Lord was kindled," but that "the anger of the Eternal blazed out in fury." In his version Revelation becomes a book of fearful foreboding, a tornado warning on a stormy night, a forecast of blood, doom, and death.

As I read Moffatt's version of the Apocalypse, I was amazed. Surely, I thought, he is mistaken; Revelation is not like this. Since then I have concluded that Moffatt is right. To a certain extent, at least, Revelation is what he makes it out to be: a foretelling of the utterly terrible. And this is one reason why, in any version, Revelation is so effective, and why it is important that we study it today.

Through the symbols in the Apocalypse—seven angels blowing seven trumpets, a scarlet woman riding a seven-headed beast, a burning mountain plunging into the sea, locusts swarming from a bottomless pit—God has revealed the course of human history from the time of John down to our own day, tragic with disappointment, appalling with apostasy, heartless with persecution, bloody with warfare. The Book of Revelation contains much of sadness and anger because life on our planet has seen so much of sadness and anger. It is right that in chapter 6 souls under the altar cry out, "How long, O Lord?" for this is the cry that has ascended time and again since John recorded his visions.

A personal friend of mine, a devout Christian in her early thirties, was the mother of four happy boys and girls. One Sunday her husband took the children rowing at a beach resort, and the boat capsized. Only the eldest boy and girl survived. The father and the youngest child were brought in beyond hope. The fourth child, a laughing little blonde-haired lass, was found early next morning among the rocks, her curls waving in the tide.

Revelation says that even for Christians life will sometimes be just like this. "For ten days you will have tribulation." Revelation 2:10, R.S.V. "It [the beast] was allowed to make war on the saints." Revelation 13:7, R.S.V. "Woe to you, O earth and sea,

for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" Revelation 12:12, R.S.V.

But Revelation is by no means only a forecast of doom and death. Far from it! By foretelling disaster and trial it reveals how truly God knows the end from the beginning. Compare Isaiah 46:10. But far beyond this, it rings with comfort and hope for every faithful Christian, and even for the world at large. Above the black and blood-red clouds that fill the valleys of Revelation soar sheer white mountain peaks on which the sun blazes in glory.

The greatest of these peaks, indeed the theme of the whole book, is the message that from John's day until the infinite reaches of eternity, *Christ stands as Conqueror surrounded by those whom He has encouraged to become co-conquerors with Himself.*

The characteristic name for Jesus in Revelation is "the Lamb"; it is used of Him in this book twenty-eight times. In chapter 5, verse 6, where the name is used for the first time, Christ is introduced as "a Lamb . . . as though it had been slain." R.S.V. We are continually reminded in Revelation of the One who Isaiah said would someday be wounded for our transgressions and be led as a lamb to the slaughter. (Isaiah 53:7.) But in Revelation, written as it was several decades later than Christ's death and resurrection, the Lamb who by then "had been slain" is not seen on the cross but "in the midst of the throne" (Revelation 7:17), while the eternal choirs gathered around Him proclaim, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!" Revelation 5:12, R.S.V.

This triumphant "Lamb" is not alone. Always in Revelation He is seen, not merely in the company of heavenly beings, but also in association with His human people, either moving among them in their trials or surrounded by them in His victory, sharing the power and the spoils of His conquest with them.

Right at the beginning of the book, with His usual genius for making first things first, Christ proclaims Himself to John as the *Conqueror over Death*. "Fear not," He says; "I died, and behold I am alive for evermore." But not content to enjoy His victory alone He adds, "And I have the keys of Death." Revelation 1:17, 18, R.S.V.



Clyde
Lovansha
Artist

ILLUSTRATION BY FRANKLIN D. HOE OF BOSTON AND HEARST

What good news this was for John! When he saw this vision of Jesus, he was an old man. For sixty years he had watched for Christ's return; now the living Christ was revealed, standing right before his eyes and declaring Himself to be the Conquerer of the grave, invested with authority to open the tomb for every faithful Christian.

Immediately after naming Himself Conqueror over death, Jesus portrays Himself to John as Conqueror *within the church*, the One who walks among the "seven lampstands" which represent the "seven churches" of God (Revelation 1:19, 20, R.S.V.), that is, the church of God in every age.

Jesus knew that the Christian church would fail of the grand ideal which He held out for it. In the Apocalypse He referred to Christians who would yield to temptations of the grossest type, the "Nicolaitans" (2:15) and "Jezebel" (2:20), love that would die (2:4), and lukewarm types whom He would "spew out" of His mouth (3:15). In "Sardis" He foresaw only a few who had not "soiled their garments" (3:4, R.S.V.); yet moving among the people, He promised that these "few" would walk with Him in white for they were worthy (3:4). And to every Christian in every age He sends out the invitation, "He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with Me on My throne, as I Myself conquered and sat down with My Father on His throne." Revelation 3:21, R.S.V.

One of the saddest aspects of human experience has been the relative impotence—even the actual evil—of the Christian church. The Fourth Crusade, designed to pit Christians against Turks (bad as that would have been), ended with Catholics battling against their fellow Eastern Orthodox Christians. Between 1618 and 1649 a third of the population of Central Europe fell dead in a grisly religious war fought between Catholics and Protestants. Both Germany and France claimed to be Christian nations throughout the first world war, a massacre that saw hundreds of thousands die in the mud at Verdun to move the battle line four miles and accomplish nothing.

Perhaps you who read these lines are suffering from something wrong within the church. Perhaps you are smarting under some injustice or hypocrisy practised by members of the congregation of your choice; or perhaps you have succumbed to a particularly difficult temptation yourself and are amazed at what you consider to be your own hypocrisy. Do not despair or give up! Remember, too, that He is walking through His church. He knows everyone who is evil; and He knows everyone who by His grace is clinging to "the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus." Revelation 14:12. If someone you know is going to be lost, this is no reason for you also to be lost, is it? See to it that no one takes your crown! (Revelation 3:11.) Jesus conquered every temptation that confronted Him, and He says to everyone in the church today, "He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with Me on My throne." Revelation 3:21, R.S.V.

In the Apocalypse Jesus reveals Himself not only as the Conqueror over death and the Conqueror within the church but also as the *Conqueror over the nations*. To anyone disturbed by fear respecting a third world war, the message of Revelation 11:15-17 rings with hope. It foretells the day when the kingdoms of the world

will become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ, when all heaven shall raise the paean, "We give Thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because Thou hast taken to Thee Thy great power, and hast reigned." The implication of the promise here is clear: The Christ who one day will take His great power and rule the nations, has power to conquer the nations at any moment He pleases. And Revelation 7:1-3 shows that He is indeed using this power to control the nations at the present time in order to protect and defend His own. Says John, "I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, *holding back the four winds of the earth*" (R.S.V.) till the servants of God have been sealed in their foreheads.

Here is the great truth that "behind the dim unknown, standeth God amid the shadows, keeping watch upon His own." No wind that blows, no holocaust of war, can touch a single man or woman on whom Christ has set His eye.

Who is to say that Christ does not, even today, possess more power than the nations! "No weapon that is formed against thee," says Isaiah 54:17, "shall prosper." Christ is able to protect His own when He knows it is for the best, and even should a Christian die, the Christ who holds the keys of the grave will resurrect him in due course. And someday soon, when the time comes for every war to cease, Christ will take His great power and reign, setting up a new kingdom which He will populate with the saints whom He has led through every vicissitude. Compare Daniel 7:27.

Of supreme importance is the statement in the Book of Revelation as to how a Christian may overcome his trials and temptations and stand at last as co-conqueror with Christ. Revelation 12:12, 11, says, "The devil is come down unto you, having great wrath"; but "*they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*"

Christians are expected—and invited—to overcome in Christ's strength, like that Christian mother who, when her husband and children were drowned, clung determinedly to God's promises and refused to give way to murmuring doubts.

God finds ways to send help when by faith a man makes up his mind to serve Him unreservedly. And he is right, for in the Apocalypse Christ invites every Christian to share His victory over both sin and sinful men, and tells how a man may do so: "They loved not their lives unto the death." Revelation 12:11.

"After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude," John says in Revelation 7:9, 17, "which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people and tongues, [who] stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands." "For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

While it is true that Revelation is a book "of angels and horsemen and terrible beasts, of trumpets and eschatological feasts," the most striking picture, the one on which above all we should focus our faith, is that of the conquering Christ surrounded by His conquering Christians. ★★