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The Book of Revelation and How it Functions in the African American Church

BY ALFRED DARRYL JUMPER

I feel compelled to say at the outset that what follows is by no means an attempt to speak for the African American church. What I have chosen to present, within the confines of the next few pages, is an expression of my own experiences, observations, and opinions regarding the book of Revelation as it relates specifically to the African American church. I have chosen to begin with a look at how the book is preached from our pulpits. From there I will present some observations on how the book is magnified in our music. Finally, I will focus on how the book lives in our lives.

Preached from Our Pulpits

When Israel found itself on the banks of the Jordan River, Joshua records that the Lord commanded that twelve stones be taken from the Jordan and set up as a memorial

so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, "What do those stones mean to you?" then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. (Josh 4:6-7 NRSV)

God's message was that Israel should not forget its history. In like manner, we too, as African Americans in the church, must not forget our history; for surely it plays a significant role in any attempt to understand how the book of Revelation, or any other book of the Bible for that matter, has been preached from our pulpits.

To that end, ministers who are most effective in the African American church are those who recognize and honor our history as a people and, in so doing, create sermons that come alive because they speak to the personal experiences of the hearers. It has been suggested that in order to get people to move en masse, it is necessary only to tie one's agenda to a cause that is near and dear to the people's hearts. One such cause for African Americans is religion. Perhaps that explains why so many "leaders" in the African American community have been ministers—Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, Adam Clayton Powell, Richard H. Cain, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, and a long list of others who have sought to help define the role of Christianity for a persecuted people who found themselves involuntary residents in a hostile land.

Similarly, in discussing the historical context for understanding Revelation, Eugene Boring points out:

Already in early Christianity it was believed that there was a widespread and official persecution of Christians by the Roman government in John's day, and that Revelation was written to strengthen and console Christians who were enduring such persecution for their faith.¹

John develops this theme by presenting a series of images that depict violence against, and anguished suffering by, the people of God. If it is true that suffering is faith's greatest contradiction, then nowhere in scripture is that more evident than in the book of Revelation.

God's message of great hope, revealed through John in the book of Revelation, finds perhaps its most kindred and attentive ear in the African American church.

But notice how John, in the midst of these violent images, intersperses messages of encouragement and visions of hope as he tries to get his hearer/readers to understand that God is faithful and will act if only they can hold on a little while longer. When one considers the history of the African American in the United States, it becomes readily obvious that this message, perhaps more than any other in scripture, defines our struggle as a religious people. It is this theme that is frequently, repeatedly, and necessarily preached from pulpits in the African American church. Historically, African Americans have ceaselessly beaten a path to the doorstep of the church Sunday after Sunday. Tired, weary, and unsatisfied with the diagnostic labels pinned on us by a society that sometimes seems not to care about "our issues," we come to the church on Sunday morning seeking a second opinion in our struggle to define ourselves or, at least, not to be defined by others. And, like Mary standing at the empty tomb of Jesus, our faith is renewed, our hope revitalized, and our resolve strengthened when we find that Jesus is alive and that he dwells with us!

God's message of great hope, revealed through John in the book of Revelation, finds perhaps its most kindred and attentive ear in the African American church. It is to the book of Revelation, with its eschatological view of a glorious and victorious church, that African Americans turn when we find ourselves in desperate need of that "Rock in a weary land."² It is this book that helps us to understand more clearly the meaning of the song we like to sing:

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
 Because He lives, all fear is gone;
 Because I know He holds the future,
 And life is worth the living just because He lives!³

It is this book that allows us a heavenly glimpse of a risen Jesus, at once our shelter, our hope, our promise, and our liberator. Indeed, the liberation, or "freedom," theme is one that figures very prominently in the religious experience and the exhortations from the pulpit in the African

American church. During slavery, the word was used from our pulpits in anticipation of our release from bondage. After emancipation, the word focused on our right to move freely from place to place and to be educated and gainfully employed. Today, the idea expressed from our pulpits is more in keeping with eradication of social and economic injustice. Regardless of the age, however, the word has always symbolically represented freedom from oppression in the sense that God has called his people to be free that they might worship him. This is the message that God, through his servant Moses, sent to Pharaoh, and a message that continually rings out in the hearts and minds of African Americans in the church today.

In order to understand how the book of Revelation functions in the African American church, it is important that we not forget whence we have come. James H. Cone has opined that African American preachers are unquestionably historical in their view of God, seeing him as the great liberator in history. I agree. When our "Pharaoh" was slavery, we looked to God. When our "Pharaoh" was segregation, we looked to God. When our "Pharaoh" was police brutality, drive-by shootings, or corporal punishment unequally applied, again, we looked to God. As Cone argues:

That is why the black Church was involved in the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement in the twentieth century. Black preachers reasoned that if God delivered Israel from Pharaoh's army and Daniel from the lion's den, then God will deliver black people from American slavery and oppression. So the content of their thought was liberation and they communicated that message through preaching, singing, and praying.⁴

With these thoughts in mind, let's look at how the book of Revelation is magnified in our music.

Magnified in Our Music

To say that music has been an integral part of the religious experience in the African American church would be a gross understatement. More than representing simply one aspect of the worship service, music has been and remains the catalyst that has solidified our entire religious endeavor. Long after the sermon has been delivered, and long after the communion has been celebrated, it is the music that continually rings out in our hearts and minds. Historically, our music has been a reflection of our journey, an attempt to put into words and song the essence of

our experience—our suffering and disappointments, as well as our hope, triumphs, and fulfillment. Indeed, worship is an act of celebration, and we come to celebrate the risen Christ through songs that speak to our condition. Like the book of Revelation, Negro spirituals (songs that came out of our slavery experience) are both this-worldly and otherworldly, and singing these songs affirms a great deal more than the lyrics, on the surface, might suggest. When slaves sang, “Steal away to Jesus, steal away home, I ain’t got long to stay here,”⁵ for example, their setting dictated that the eschatological view was, in that instance, secondary to the more immediate meaning that someone was planning to “steal away” from the plantation and make a break for freedom. It has been argued, too, that when slaves sang of “heaven,” they had in mind sometimes the eschatological realm, sometimes the North, and at other times, depending on their particular and immediate situation, whichever came first.

In like manner, other songs such as “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Amazing Grace,” “It Is Well with My Soul,” and “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” remain so immensely popular because they speak to our condition. These songs not only help us to understand more clearly and to cope with our past and present conditions, but they also function as harbingers of hope for brighter days ahead. Just as the people of Israel cried out in song to God as they bore the burden of slavery while captive in Egypt, so we too petition God in songs with an otherworldly view toward that new Jerusalem that awaits us on the other side. Surely this thought was in view when Mahalia Jackson sang. She understood, as did so many before and since, that her quest for a glorious hereafter lay just beyond her present travail. In one of her more popular songs, “I Will Move On Up a Little Higher,” she sang:

Coming over hills and mountains,
Goin’ to drink from the Christian fountain,
And all of God’s sons and daughters, that
morning,
Will drink the healing waters.⁶

Again, while the “healing waters” have eschatological overtones, the immediate prior reference is surely to the segregationist policies that formed the basis for the daily struggles that she and other African Americans faced.

Perhaps no songwriter was better at encouraging us in our religious sojourn than the great Thomas A. Dorsey, who wrote these words:

I was lost in sin and sorrow
On an isle in life’s dark sea

When I saw far in the distance
There a ship, it seemed to be;
Then I saw the captain beckon,
Then he called out loud and free,
“I have come, my friend, to save you;
Step on board and follow me.”
I got up but hesitated,
Wondering who this friend could be,
Tho’ the waves were wild and dashing,
Seeming they would swallow me;
Then he raised his hand toward me,
Calm’d the wild and raging sea;
With a voice so sweet and tender,
These words whisper’d soft to me.
Then I stepped aboard the vessel
Through the straits and through the gorge;
Many years it sail’d the waters,
Many souls have made the voyage;
Then I recognized the captain,
It was Jesus in command;
’Tis the old ship of Zion,
And it’s bound for Canaan land.⁷

In striking similarity to John’s message to the churches of Asia, we too are here reminded that if we just hold on to what we’ve been taught, if we just stay in the ship with Jesus as the captain, we have the assurance that the ship we get on this time will surely deliver us safely home.

On closer examination of the book of Revelation, when one considers the socio-religio-political crisis in the midst of which the seven churches of Asia found themselves, it becomes apparent that John used the apocalyptic not so much to edify as to deliver a word so desperately needed to sustain life. The music of the African American church continues this most worthy tradition as a life-sustaining force. Consider the song “We Shall Overcome”—a song that gave hope and uplifted an entire people in the midst of one of the most spiritually troubling and politically and socially divisive eras of our nation’s history. It has been suggested that many, if not most, of those men and women who marched through the streets of the nation to call attention to the injustices that African Americans faced were God-fearing, Christian men and women led, once again, by a minister. The African American religious experience is inextricably woven into the very fabric of our lives, and it is this issue to which we now turn as we consider how the book of Revelation lives in our lives.

Lives in Our Lives

Earlier, I alluded to the role of religion in the socialization of African Americans, pointing out that religion is

one thing that historically has been and remains almost universally near and dear to our hearts. Indeed, it is, I believe, our history that has led us to be so strongly religious. In times of great despair and social injustice at every turn, there has been little, if anything, else that we as a people could hold on to! Therefore, every religious experience—be it a sermon preached on a Sunday morning, a private Bible study, or simply a quiet reflection on our blessings in the midst of misery and poverty, has become part of our very being, our very souls. Henry Mitchell points out, I believe, correctly:

If today's Black Christians turn to church, pastor, and religion for everything, it is only a habit from the centuries, going back beyond their ancestor's arrival in North America to the culture of West Africa. The great strength of Black Christianity today, therefore, is not due to any great missionary activity, but to independent, clandestine meetings which adapted their African Traditional Religion into a profoundly creative and authentically Christian faith. Black Christianity has the tremendous momentum of a faith deeply embedded in the culture.⁸

Effective ministry, then, requires working within the framework of the culture of each congregation in an attempt to teach lessons that come alive so that the congregation, in turn, might live fuller, richer, and more productive and spirit-filled lives.

This idea is neither farfetched nor unique to Mitchell. In fact, the apostle John, in writing to the churches of Asia, chose to write in a literary genre with which his hearers/readers were more than vaguely familiar, having been culturally conditioned by the numerous other apocalyptic writings of their day. John was very much aware of the culture of his hearers/readers and used that knowledge to deliver words of great hope and encouragement. Some have argued that it is in our suffering and our condition of brokenness that we are drawn closest to God and in times like these that the Father reveals himself most clearly to his children.

It should come as no surprise, then, that African Americans find great promise and immeasurable hope in the book of Revelation. While, in a general sense, the causes of our suffering may have changed, the fact remains that we, like all others, still have our crosses to bear, and we bring those burdens to the Father and lay them at the feet of the One who has assured us that we already have the victory. It is in the book of Revelation that we find great comfort in knowing that all we have to do is hold on! Indeed, John shows us in a series of pictures that to give up on God and to join the anti-God forces is to join an army that has already lost the war. So holding on is what we do. If history has taught us as African Americans in the church nothing else, it has taught us how to hold on! Like the hearers/readers of John's Revelation, we too hear the anxious cries of the martyrs in heaven asking, "How long?" But what keeps us going, what motivates, encourages, and strengthens us, I believe, is that we also hear the voice of a risen Savior who answers the martyrs' call and in his last recorded words in scripture says to us, "Surely I come quickly" (Rev 22:20 KJV). The book of Revelation functions in the African American church exactly as it was intended when, in this context, it is preached from our pulpits, magnified in our music, and brought to life in our lives.

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Notes

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 16.

² Ira D. Sankey, "A Shelter in the Time of Storm."

³ William J. Gaither, "Because He Lives."

⁴ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis, 1999), 51.

⁵ American Negro Melody, "Steal Away to Jesus."

⁶ Herbert W. Brewster, "I Will Move On Up a Little Higher."

⁷ Thomas A. Dorsey, "Old Ship of Zion!"

⁸ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 13.