

# MONUMENTS TO SUFFERING IN HEAVEN: MIROSLAV VOLF, THE HEALING OF MEMORY AND CRUCIFORM IDENTITY

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**'EITHER HEAVEN WILL HAVE NO MONUMENTS TO KEEP THE MEMORY OF THE HORRORS ALIVE, OR IT WILL BE CLOSER TO HELL THAN WE WOULD LIKE TO THINK.'**<sup>1</sup>

As we prepare to commemorate the abolition of slavery, it is clear that there remains a sense of hurt within communities that remember their forebears as victims of tyranny and injustice. This has recently been demonstrated by the debate over whether the British Prime Minister ought to apologise for the slavery practised in the past, upon which much of Britain's prosperity was built. Complex issues require to be discussed in seeking to resolve this debate and in asking how we might most appropriately reflect upon a great evil perpetrated in the past. Such discussions, particularly those in which Christians play a role, ought to take into account the important contributions of Miroslav Volf. His book *Exclusion and Embrace* is one of the most important and mature studies of human reconciliation that theology has given us. It is erudite and insightful, with an integrity matched by few other works – an integrity that stems from Volf's own background as a Croatian and his close experience of the evils that took place as part of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. He has further developed his interest in theologies of reconciliation in two recent books, *Free of Charge* and *The End of Memory*.<sup>2</sup> It is with a great deal of respect that I offer a critique of one aspect of Volf's thought and a constructive suggestion of how we may arrive at a more thoroughly biblical and Christological notion of reconciliation.

The aspect of Volf's thought that I am uncomfortable with is his suggestion that for true reconciliation to take place, and for true healing to occur, there must be an eschatological 'forgetting' of the evil that has been suffered. Volf's language in *Exclusion and Embrace*, reflected in the quotation at the head of this article, suggests that he means by this more than simply a conscious decision not to hold blame against the perpetrator; it suggests that he means the very memory of suffering and evil must be erased: 'As long as we remember the injustice and suffering we will not be whole, and the troubling and unanswerable "open question" that craves resolution in an impossible harmony will keep resurfacing.'<sup>3</sup>

In *The End of Memory*, the idea is significantly nuanced: on this side of the great judgement we are not to forget but to 'remember rightly'.<sup>4</sup> On the other side of that judgement, however, perpetrated evil will be forgotten, not in the sense of being erased, but in the sense of 'not

coming to mind'.<sup>5</sup> Even the cross, he suggests, will cease to come to mind in this eschatological effacement: 'We relate to the crucified Christ as long as we are being redeemed. Once *we have been* unalterably redeemed, his death along with our sin can be swallowed in his own divine life as one of the Holy Three who are the Holy One.'<sup>6</sup>

Several biblical texts are cited in support of this – Isaiah 43.18; 65.17; Revelation 21.4 – but none is examined in any depth to ascertain whether it will truly support Volf's case.

The problem with Volf's suggestion is that it fails to engage in proper depth with biblical descriptions of the eschaton. This is seen most clearly seen if we consider the idea that there must be no monuments to suffering in heaven. The language is beautiful and compelling, but it runs aground when confronted by biblical descriptions of a heaven that is ruled over by a lamb 'looking as if it had been slain' (Rev 5.6) and populated by those who have been given the white robes of martyrs (about which I shall say more below): surely these are monuments to suffering.

In what follows, I will suggest a more biblical notion of the transformation of suffering that will draw primarily upon the imagery and language of the book of Revelation.<sup>7</sup> This book is particularly relevant to the subject for two reasons. First, it is a book that is full of heavenly imagery; indeed, the 'revelation' that it contains is essentially that of the heavenly reality greater than that which may be perceived with our senses: this reality is the horizon that gives perspective to our actions in the present. Second, and as importantly, it 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. My suggestion is that a truly Christian response to suffering is not to forget it – now or in the world to come – but to make it part of our cruciform identity in Christ. It is overcome not by being lost (i.e. forgotten), but by becoming part of God's great redemptive work. This kind of memory centres on the identity of the Christian in Christ: the past is retained not because it is unjust to forget but because it is part of our identity as those who are crucified with Christ and who participate in his work.

## REVELATION 5: THE IDENTITY OF THE VICTOR AND THE NATURE OF 'VICTORY'

Revelation 5 develops the description of the heavenly throne room that is found in Revelation 4. John is full of

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grief because of a perceived failure or sense of defeat: no one is found worthy to open the scroll that is in God's right hand (Rev 5.4). His grief, though, is short lived as he is informed that the Lion of the tribe of Judah has 'triumphed' and is worthy to take and open the scroll (Rev 5.5). The narrative proceeds to subvert our expectations of the identity of the victor: where we expect John to lay eyes upon a lion – a powerful symbol of victory and might – we find him instead seeing a lamb, a slain lamb, indeed. Verses 9–13 develop this further as the Lamb continues to be worshipped for the victory achieved by his death.

In rupturing our expectations of the identity of the victor, Revelation 5 forces a re-construal of victory itself: the cross is now the great paradigm and success can no longer be measured according to human expectation. This is essentially an apocalyptic move, as truths that could not be perceived without divine revelation – truths that go against the grain of human expectation – are made known to God's people.

#### REVELATION 6—7: THE VICTORY OF THE 144,000.

This revealed truth becomes the basis for God's response to the martyrs' plea for vengeance in Revelation 6.10: 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?' (NRSV).

The narrative again surprises us, for God gives no answer to this question except for a seemingly irrelevant action: 'They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed' (Rev 6.11, NRSV).

The image of the white robe is taken up again in 7.14, where at last it begins to be explained: 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (RSV).

The mention of 'the tribulation' links Revelation 7.14 with Daniel 12.1, where we read of the 'time of distress' associated with an eschatological war (associations seen also in Rev 7.5–8 and 14.4). This background is suggestive for our understanding of Revelation 7.14. In Daniel 11.35, a verse found in the immediate context of Daniel 12.1, we read of 'the wise' who have 'fallen': 'Some of the wise shall fall, so that they may be refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end, for there is still an interval until the time appointed' (NRSV).

The verbs of the purpose clause in 11.35 are then taken up in Daniel 12.10, where the first two occurs in Hebrew verb forms (*biḥpael*) that suggest a reflexive sense: 'Many shall purify *themselves*, and make *themselves* white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise shall understand' (RSV).

If we read Daniel 12.10 in the light of 11.35, where the wise 'fall', i.e. die or suffer, then the idea seems to be of a self-purification achieved through martyrdom. When we approach Revelation 7 and 14 with this background in mind, the same idea seems to be operative. Thus, to wash one's robes and 'make them white in the blood of the Lamb' is a reference to participation in the Lamb's cruciform victory.

It is important to note the narrative chain: the desire for vengeance is met with the gift of a white robe; that white robe in turn becomes a symbol of martyrdom (they have white, spotless robes because they have suffered); this is part of the sufferer's identity as a cruciform victor. The plea for vengeance, then, is resolved by a narrative that re-presents what the suffering has achieved: the identity of the martyrs as the pure ones has been achieved *through their suffering* and the white robe image is crucial to this. As Bauckham notes: 'The combination of the Lamb and the 144,000 conveys the sense that there is a holy war to be fought, but to be fought and won by sacrificial death.'<sup>8</sup>

#### REVELATION 11: THE TWO WITNESSES

Revelation 11 takes up the imagery of the 'lampstand' that is used of the Church in Revelation 1.12,20 and 2.1, and should, therefore, be read as a description of the Church's testimony. The imagery naturally connects with Zechariah 4 (especially Rev 11.4; cf. Zech 4.2–3), but there is no simple correspondence with this text: it is notable that in Revelation 11.6, the two witnesses are modelled not on Joshua and Zerubbabel (named in Zech 4) but on Moses and Elijah: 'They have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire' (Rev 11.6, NRSV).

The power that is mentioned in these verses is provided solely that the two witnesses may complete their testimony: immediately they have finished their *marturia* they are attacked and killed by the beast from the sea (Rev 11.7). Their experience of death explicitly mirrors that of Jesus, though recast using the familiar

*'the cross subverts all assumptions as to what victory or success should look like and how they will come to pass'*

## NOTES

1. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 136.
2. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) and *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
3. Volf, *Exclusion*, p. 134.
4. The four chapters found on pp. 39–128 of *The End of Memory* explain this idea, exploring the ways in which we, as victims, can often alter or skew memories. These chapters deserve careful reflection in any discussions of justice and reconciliation.
5. See especially *ibid.*, pp. 145–47.
6. *Ibid.*, 191.
7. My reading of Revelation is deeply indebted to the work of Richard J Bauckham, especially as found in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).
8. Bauckham, *Climax*, p. 230.
9. Note, though, that the martyrs are not buried.
10. Bauckham, *Climax*, pp. 280–1.

► Danielic image of 'time, two times and half a time' (Dan 12.7 NRSV): they are raised after three-and-a-half days (Rev 11.11).<sup>9</sup> Their resurrection and ascension is accompanied by an earthquake in which 7,000 are killed and the rest of the populace – a remaining nine tenths – of the city turn to God. This inverts the figure of Isaiah 6.13 and Amos 5.3, in which only one tenth are saved, and that of 1 Kings 19.18, in which only 7,000 glorify God rather than Baal. As Bauckham notes, the witnesses' ministry of repentance is ultimately successful, but only because of their martyrdom: 'The reason why the prophetic ministry of the two witnesses has an effect unparalleled by their Old Testament precedents lies in their participation in the victory of the Lamb ... When they too maintain their witness even to death and are seen to be vindicated as true witnesses, then their witness participates in the power of his witness to convert the nation.'<sup>10</sup>

Again, the cross subverts all assumptions as to what victory or success should look like and how they will come to pass.

## THE HEALING OF THE NATIONS

One final passage is helpful to note before I move on to some conclusions. Revelation 22.1–3, as the climactic part of the vision, speaks of the recovery of Eden and of the privilege of access to the tree of life, the leaves of which are 'for the healing of the nations'. The simple point of note is that the tree grows on either side of the river of the water of life, which flows from the throne of God and of *the Lamb*. The final eschatological healing, then, itself proceeds from the martyrdom of Jesus.

## CONCLUSIONS

Volf argues that we must ultimately be freed from the memory of the evil we have suffered. If he simply means by this that we do not hold to account those who have wronged us, then his point is well-taken, but his language suggests more than this, that our memories are purged of all recollection of suffering. Our study of Revelation, however, suggests that evil and injustice are not forgotten, even in the world to come, but are transformed by becoming part of our cruciform identity as those who share in the martyrdom of Christ. Far from there being no monuments to suffering in heaven, Revelation portrays it as full of reminders of suffering (the Lamb on the throne, the white robes), precisely because these are the instruments and agents of salvation.

As we reflect upon the sufferings of those who were tyrannised through slavery – and perhaps feel a desire, as part of a community with a shared heritage of such suffering, to see justice done – we ought to appreciate what Revelation tells us about a properly Christian response and allow it to challenge us. Are our actions and demands firmly set in the context of a desire to see our own communal witness bring about the salvation of those who are the heirs of the perpetrators? Do the good of the kingdom and the salvation of the world shape our stance towards those who wronged our forebears?

It is important too, however, to recognise that the call to take up one's cross is a universal of Christian discipleship. At its heart it speaks of the laying down of *my* rights, *my* freedoms, *my* self in deference to God's claim over *my* life and the role that he would have it play in the unfolding growth of the kingdom, just as Jesus did. Some injustices are fleeting and tiny, others leave an ugly stain upon world history, but for the Christian, all must be responded to alike: laying down one's rights for the sake of the kingdom. ■