MONUMENTS TO SUFFERING IN HEAVEN: MIROSLAV VOLF, THE HEALING OF MEMORY AND CHURCH FORM IDENTITY

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"EITHER HEAVEN WILL HAVE NO MONUMENTS TO KEEP THE MEMORY OF THE MORTALS ALIVE, OR IT WILL BE CLOSER TO HELL THAN WE WOULD LIKE TO THINK."

As we prepare to commemorate the abolition of slavery, it is clear that there remains a sense of injury 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 Czech 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. It is with a great deal of regret that we 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 'forgiving' 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.'

In The End of Memory, the idea is significantly nuanced: on the one hand, the great injustice we are not to forget but to remember rightly. 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.” 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 unliterally redeemed, his death along with our sin can be swallowed within his own divine life as one of the Holy Three who are the Holy One.”

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 if we consider the idea that there are monuments to suffering in heaven. The language is beautiful and compelling, but it runs aground when confronted by biblical descriptions of a world 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. 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 can be perceived with our senses. Second, 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—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 Christ 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 VICΤOR 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 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-configuration 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—that 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 you be with your people and avenge our blood upon 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 of the full complement of those who had been crucified and who would 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 12:2, where we read of the time of distress associated with an eschatological war (associations see also in Rev 7:5–8 and 14:4). This background is suggestive of our understanding of Revelation 7:14. In Daniel 11:35, a verse found in the immediate context of Daniel 12, we read of the ‘wain’ 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 occur in Hebrew terms (םילשורי) that suggest the redemptive 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 11 with this understanding 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 that the clause allicieth the dicoenin 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 victim. 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.”

REVELATION 11: THE TWO WITNESSES

Revelation 11 takes up the imagery of the ‘lampstand’ that is used of the Church in Revelation 1:20 and 2:1, and should, therefore, be read as a description of the Church’s testimony. The imagery naturally connects with Zechariah 6 (especially Rev 11:4; cf. Zech 4:2–5), but there is no simple correspondence with this text: it is noticeable 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 by the two witnesses themselves and it is their testimony: immediately they have finished their martyrdom they are arrested 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

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As we prepare to commemorate the annihilation 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.

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The point 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.’

In The End of Memory, the idea is significantly nuanced: one can appreciate the great judgements that we are not to forget but to ‘remember rightly.’ On the other side of that judgement, however, perpetrators evil will be forgotten, not in the sense of being erased, but in the sense of not coming to mind.” Even the cross, he suggests, will cease to come to mind in this eschatological effectiveness: “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.”

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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 if we consider the idea that there will be no further memories of suffering in heaven. This 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.

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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 were 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).

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The verbs of the purpose clause in 11.35 are then taken up in Daniel 12.10, where the first two occur in Hebrew texts (‘made righteous’) that suggest a paraphrastic 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).

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It is important to note the narrative clause, the design 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.’

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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 whowronged 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 speaketh of the laying down of any rights, our friendships, our self in reverence 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 tidy, 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. ■

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.

GENESIS 38:1–26 IS AN ACCOUNT OF A YOUNG WOMAN OF JUDAH’S JOLLYNESS THROUGH MALE SPACE — DETERMINED BY MARRIAGE, WIDOWHOOD, PROSTITUTION, VICTIMISATION, RESISTANCE AND MOTHERHOOD. Her story is embedded within the account of Joseph. Being married to an eldest son, who dies, and later left at the mercy of a Levite marriage in order to continue the patriarchal bloodstream, her story is also one which reveals the profound impact of changing circumstances on her life.

We also live in a world where being born of a certain ethnicity, ability or gender can determine your life chances. Tamar was a young woman who suffered the unnaturally early death of her first husband, and the negligence of her husband’s brother in his Levite marriage to her, where he practiced statutes against them and did not impregnate her as the emerging social customs of the day required. Known even as the sin of Onan and seeking terror into many young men who practice masturbation or those who use this emotionally jarring form of contraceptives, this young man was struck down by God for his selfishness in not giving a son to his dead brother’s memory. Tamar’s father-in-law finally intervenes and sends her back to her parents’ house in disgrace. This would not have been a comfortable place for Tamar to be. She would have been widely avoided as having brought misfortune and death to two husbands. Moreover, as a widow (and a motherless widow at that), she would probably have had one of the lowest ranks in her parents’ household, cooking, cleaning, fulfilling the peremptory needs of others, being situated next in status only to the female children in the household, condemned to wearing widows’ clothing as a sign of her grief and obedience. She could also have been subject to random attacks of violence just as one in two women in the UK today experience some form of violence in their household or work place over the course of their lifetime, including rape, beatings, stalking and harassment. In 2002 it was estimated that there were 12.9 million incidents of domestic violence against women in the UK during the previous year.

Returning to the story of Tamar we can see that she was unhappy with her lot. She bears that her father-in-law is passing by doing some sheep shearing and decides to go and petition him so that she can again be accepted into her former household’s family. Writing at the gates of Enaim on the road to Timneh she sees husband’s younger brother Shelah, to whom she should have been given in marriage. However, being disguised with a veil, Judah believes her to be a prostitute: a woman available to him as a newly widowed man to have sex with. Tamar’s story has been used and abused, including the violation of customary law by not being given Shelah in marriage and so asks for Judah’s signet ring and staff.

Her story — of being marginalised and brought to a place where she is then taken into proximised sex — is a global story. Today, hundreds of thousands of young women globally are trafficked (an estimated 120,000 into the European Union). They are sold into the growing pay-as-you-go sex markets in the wealthy countries of Europe, North America and Oceania, Japan and the Middle East.

Now you may say, ‘Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, and there is nothing that can be done about it.’ Today, whilst the patterns of sustaining reproduction and of maintaining the welfare of the clan that dictated Tamar’s particular circumstances are now drying out, there are nevertheless many countries where women are not autonomous or equal in status to men. Throughout the world women are being forced to migrate away from their homes, looking for employment, opportunities, recognition, and sometimes safety. When we say ‘prostitution is the oldest profession’ what does that say to us and to those caught in prostitution? It says that prostitution is a worldwide and highly aspirational career choice, widely extolled by the meritocracy, and all extremely successful organisations.

We know, however, that this is not the case. Any personal of a careers guidance booklet at your local school would show by the absence of the P-word that this is not a direction which society believes leads to human flourishing and success. We need to face up to the truth. Prostitution is not a profession — no profession in the world entails worse health, worse payments, decreased social status and diminished prospects of keeping your children and your wider sibling relationships as you become embedded in its web. The terrible quintuple murder of young women in Ipswich in December 2006 was an appalling shock for many. But those caught in prostitution do not only risk death with a hugely escalated risk of violent death, but also are ubiquitously subject to unwanted pregnancies, to enforced abortions, to rape and to grievous bodily assault as part of their work.