

Emily Dickinson's Religious Poems on Salvation: "Of Tribulation - these are They," And "I had no Cause to be awake -"

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The book of Revelation is one of Emily Dickinson's favorite books of the Bible. Especially the crystallized idea in this book is utilized as an Image in her representative poems to convey the core message of the poet's sense of immortality. There are repeated patterns in the way in which the poet employs biblical images such as "white," "Snow," "Palms" and so on. I would like to demonstrate how each image functions in order to give a more complete picture in the following poems: "Of Tribulation – these are They," (F328B) and "I had no Cause to be awake -" (F662).

"Of Tribulation – these are They," one of Dickinson's religious poems, starts with a revised line from the book of Revelation. The poem is one of several explicit Christian verses on the idea of salvation. In the New Testament, the term "salvation" is most generally employed as a comprehensive word for the spiritual and eternal blessings brought to men by the appearance and redeeming death of Jesus Christ. As Virginia Oliver suggests, "Of Tribulation, these are They" is one of several representative poems concerned in a more general way with salvation.

Take a look at the way in which some images of the book of Revelation are incorporated into the whole poem to demonstrate the significance of each image derived from the Revelations:

Of Tribulation – these are They,
Denoted by the White.
The Spangled Gowns, a lesser Rank
Of Victors, designate –

All these – did conquer –
But the Ones who overcame most times –
Wear nothing commoner than Snow –
No Ornament – but Palms –

"Surrender" – is a sort unknown
On this superior soil –
"Defeat", an Outgrown Anguish,
Remembered, as the Mile

Our panting Ankle barely passed,
 When Night devoured the Road –
 But we – stood – whispering in the House –
 And all we said – was Saved!

The very first line is an almost direct quotation from Rev. 7:14: “And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” In the first line the subject and the verb are inverted, therefore, the phrase “Of Tribulation” is emphasized and the Latin-originated term “Tribulation” catches the reader’s eye. To answer the earlier question in the book of Revelation, “what are these which are arrayed in white robes? And whence came they?” (Rev. 7:13), the response “These are they which came out of great tribulation” is placed in the context of the book.

“Tribulation” is the key word to decipher the message. We can hear Christ’s voice here: “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). According to the first edition of Webster’s Dictionary, “it often denotes the troubles and distresses which proceed from persecution” in Scripture. *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas À Kempis which Susan Gilbert Dickinson gave to Emily contains one chapter on the necessity of bearing trials and tribulation, “On the Royal Road of the Holy Cross.” The chapter encourages the reader to “set yourself to endure trials, ..., for the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come” (87). Kempis symbolically ends the chapter with Acts 14:22: “that through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom of God.” Those who have overcome severe affliction or distresses are signified “by the White.”

The direct quotation from the book of Revelation is followed by Dickinson’s favorite image of heaven (Rev.7:16): “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat” (Rev.7:16). Dickinson expresses her hope of God’s comfort, entering the Kingdom of God, “Home in the Revelations – ‘Neither thirst any more’” (L 593).

Dickinson confesses to reading the Bible to Mrs. J.G. Holland in one of her letters by employing these images of Revelations:

Don’t tell, dear Mrs. Holland, but wicked as I am, I read my Bible sometimes, and in it as I read today, I found a verse like this, where friends should “go no more out”; and there were “no tears,” and I wished as I sat down to-night that we were *there* – not *here* – and that wonderful world had commenced, which makes such promises, and rather than to write you, I were by your side, and the “hundred and forty and four thousand” were chatting pleasantly, yet not disturbing us. (L 185)

The above quoted phrases are taken from the Revelations, where they are found in 3.12; 21.4; and 14.3. Dickinson's fascination with "the men of Revelations who 'shall not hunger any more'" is expressed in another letter: "Fabulous to me as the men of the Revelations who 'shall not hunger any more'" (L 352). The poem is about these men of the Revelations signified "by the White."

Two kinds of people are contrasted by the gowns they wear, although both of them are "victors," who are distinguished by the ranks they belong to. They are "All these – did conquer - " but are differentiated by each signifying color: "the Ones who overcome most times - / Wear nothing commoner than Snow - / No ornaments, but Palms - ." Fordyce R. Bennett's *A Reference Guide to the Bible in Emily Dickinson's Poetry* explicates these lines as follows; "the 'Brides' adored for the Groom are also 'saved' but of 'lesser Rank' than her 'Tribulation' – Passion saints, the wise virgins" (75). Those who came out of "Tribulation" deserve the higher rank in heaven. The color of each robe denotes the rank he or she belongs. "The ones who overcame most times - / Wear nothing commoner than Snow -" holds the highest rank, while "The spangled Gowns, a lesser Rank / Of victors" belong to the lower rank. These people "Denoted by the White - " are given the superiority, the very people "who overcame most times - ". "White," "Snow," and "Palms" without any ornaments are symbols of victory, triumph.

A victor is "one who conquers in war; a vanquisher; one who defeats an enemy in battle." But we use the term, "when we speak of one who overcomes a particular enemy, in a particular battle." While we apply conqueror to one who subdues countries, kingdoms or nations. The second line of the second stanza differentiates between the two kinds of soldiers. Obviously Dickinson places special emphasis on "the Ones who overcame" rather than "the conquerors of countries, kingdoms or nations."

The color "white" holds a symbolic meaning associated with the book of Revelation. The images such as "white robes and psalms in their hands" (Rev.7:9) and "Spangled Gowns" (Rev. 21:2) are explicitly taken from Revelations. Among these images, white is the key color to denote the victor. According to *Ferdman's Dictionary of the Bible*, "white" usually conveys ritualistic purity. In the New Testament, it occurs with Christological images as a sign of purity and also as a symbol of salvation. Although the latter half of the quotation is omitted, the whole line of thought could easily be traced through these associated images: "these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 14:15). The Victor, "He that overcometh" is supposed to be "clothed in white raiment" (Rev.3:5), "before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands" (Rev. 7:9).

The dictionary generalizes the image of "white" as "a positive association with God Almighty, Christ, or the righteousness, of Christian believers who have conquered as Christ conquered." The fact never to be forgotten about it is, that a higher rank designated by "the White" has been obtained

at the infinite cost of the redeeming death of Jesus Christ designated by the color “red.” Two colors, “white” and “red” coexist in the beginning of Revelations. If you would come “in white,” you would have conquered the red stage. Christ is the one who testifies that there is life beyond the grave. The whole life of Christ is a cross and martyrdom. The speaker is a martyr, following the royal road of the Holy Cross. The color imagery of white and red signals a martyr.

The later part of the poem expresses the cries or whispers of a martyr:

“Surrender” – is a sort unknown
 On this superior soil –
 “Defeat”, an Outgrown Anguish,
 Remembered, as the Mile

Our panting Ankle barely passed,
 When Night devoured the Road –
 But we – stood – whispering in the House –
 And all we said – was Saved!

The unconquerable man has finally reached “the superior soil,” heaven. “Defeat” is achieved through suffering and death, “an Outgrown Anguish.” Although the last stanza ends with a relief, “Saved,” the difficulties with walking “the Mile” are suggested: “Our panting Ankle barely passed - / When Night devoured the Road -”. The necessity to imitate Christ’s way to ultimate victory is emphasized several times after the conjunction “But.” The third line of the third stanza, “Defeat – an Outgrown Anguish - ” is the most eye-catching line and holds double meaning of death and victory. It could be remembered “as the Mile” when all these trials and tribulations are crowned with victory. “The Mile” is a metonymy for the entire human suffering as seen in another line in another poem, “A rugged billion Mile - ” (F 1538).

The last two lines testify our victory over all these trials and tribulations. There is a biblical echo in the phrase “in the House”: “In my father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you” (John 14:2). These line-final terms, “passed,” “Road,” “House,” and “Saved” are metrically inversed, therefore, they could echo back and forth to give the image of coming home. The last cry “Saved” explicitly conveys the theme of salvation, the Christian doctrine. Salvation is expressed not only in the release from the hardships of travels, but also the forgiveness of sin. Salvation in this poem means the speaker’s entry into the kingdom of God.

The same images of Revelations are also employed in the poem “I had no Cause to be awake - ”. The speaker of the poem is resurrected in the morning after the Last Judgment:

I had no Cause to be awake –
My Best – was gone to sleep –
And Morn a new politeness took –
And failed to wake them up –
But called the others – clear –
And passed their Curtains by –
Sweet Morning – When I oversleep –
Knock – Recollect – to Me –

I looked at Sunrise – Once –
And then I looked at Them –
And wishfulness in me arose –
For Circumstance the same –

'Twas such an Ample Peace –
It could not hold a Sigh –
'Twas Sabbath – with the Bells divorced –
'Twas Sunset – all the Day –

So choosing but a Gown –
And taking but a Prayer –
The Only Raiment I should need –
I struggled – and was There –

Unexpectedly the speaker of the poem was awakened by "Sweet Morning" which fell upon her, without a reason to justify the act. From the very beginning, there are two kinds of people: "them" and "the others." One group is not called while "the others" are called their names. The very reason why some people are differently treated is not known in the poem, but implied.

The second stanza introduces her experience of encountering "Sunrise," Jesus Christ:

I looked at sunrise – Once –
And then I looked at Them –
And wishfulness in me arose –
For Circumstance the same –

These lines echo some lines from Revelations, especially the pronoun “Them” in the second line catches our eye. The first object the speaker looked at was “Sunrise” and then “Them,” as a result of looking at these people, “wishfulness” arose. The pronoun “They” holds a significant meaning in the book of Revelation: “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14).

“The Only Raiment” is the key image in the last stanza containing two nouns “a Gown” and “a Prayer” in meaning, the pronoun “Them” reminds us of the line “four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment” (Rev. 4:4). White raiment is one of the three necessities for preparations for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and beatific vision in the book of Revelation. The speaker’s strong desire for what is not obtainable arose, because she had the same circumstance as the one arrayed in white robe.

Dickinson, in the last stanza, summarizes the way to reach heaven, indicating the speaker’s choice:

So choosing but a Gown –
 And taking but a Prayer –
 The Only Raiment I should need –
 I struggled – and was There

Two indefinite articles are followed by the definite, limited noun “The Only Raiment” which becomes the metaphor of the means to get heaven.

Flooded by the biblical images from Revelations, Dickinson provides some rewritings and appropriates these images for her own purpose in these two poems. Nevertheless, these associated images taken from Revelations result in weaving the Image to express the Christian doctrine of salvation.

Works Cited

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