

WHAT GOOD IS **VENGEANCE?**
THE CASE OF REVELATION 6:10

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Walter Wink asked me to do a Thinksheet on this verse, & I feel moved to do so for reasons that shall appear. Readers unfamiliar with this genre should be told, at the outset, that the development is nonlinear: each numbered section is to be experienced episodically, just as one reads the Gospels (which taught me to write Thinksheets, though I didn't realize it till I reached the middle of this sentence--so I am far from ever having used the scriptural sanction to dignify & drive my Thinksheets!).

1. Emotionally, every religion both frees & cripples. Christianity is so love-oriented ("God is love," that sort of thing) that it has extreme difficulty dealing with hate (except in Jesus' hyperbole, "hate your mother & father"). Accordingly, most Christians would read the question in this Thinksheet's title as rhetorical: vengeance is no good. But I mean it as an active question: what is the good in vengeance (there being good in it)? In between is the probative question: let's study & see if there's any good in vengeance; maybe there is, maybe not. Which-ever of the three is yours, dear reader, please give me a hear.

2. What's the author's life-world (Lebenswelt)? He's a preacher (1:9). And what's his life-situation (Sitz im Leben)? Exile for preaching. Feel yourself into both: if in reading the Bible you don't feel your-self in first, you will be unapt to become aware of your feelings, so much more powerful in your mind-world (Sinnwelt) are ideas. Nowhere else in Scripture is it more important to observe this rule than in the apocalyptic literature (eg, Ezekiel, Daniel, Jn. the Revelator): the riot of imagery will blow your brains if not first digested through your gut.

3. Recall other preachers you know of who were exiled or incarcerated for preaching. How was what they wrote un/like Jn.'s Revelation? As you think of this as a literary genre (ie, preacher-in-prison literature), does any of the rest of this material help you feel-think your way into Revelation? Into Rev.6:10? Eg, Jn. Bunyan's PILGRIM'S PROGRESS & M.L.King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." (Noteto Wink: As you can see, this Thinksheet, though occasioned by your request, is not addressed to you; you will appreciate rather that it is a suggestion as to how I would go about teaching Rev.6:10.)

4. Why don't I get to the point? If you help a bird out of its egg, it'll not be able to fly. I want you to fly, I want this scripture to live for you, so I--after the model of God, if I may chance being considered immodest--must ask you to struggle into a larger space from where you are on all this. And besides, "the point" is not just what the passage meant/means; it is rather what the Spirit is striving to do to & with you through your attending to this scripture & this Thinksheet on it. Call this meaning-to-be-lived. Not for nothing does the Hebrew word DAVAR mean both "word" & "deed."

5. How do I know, though, that the Spirit is trying to do something to & with you? Because it's implicit in my faith in (1:9) "God's word & the truth that Jesus revealed," & (to speak textually) because the Spirit is struggling to communicate through John with the seven churches Jn. is trying to tele-minister to (long-range--in writing, the earliest form of televideo) (chapters 2 & 3).

6. Peering into 6:10, what can we learn of what happened? (1) Some people are praying "in a loud voice," in fact, shouting. How long has it been since you shouted? What was it about? Under a similar circumstance, would you shout about that again? And how long has it been since you prayed? And--hardest question!--how long has it been since shouted in prayer? Would you personally find it difficult to communicate with someone you heard shouting in prayer? If so, are you able,

so to set aside those impeding feelings as to give our verse's souls under the altar a fair hearing? ((Here & in 7:10 Jn. emphasizes the high energy: it's pleonastic to add "in a loud voice" to a verb that itself means "shout," "shriek," "scream" (in papyri, of a baby), "call out," "cry out." As a high-energy verb of speech, kraz. can signal, as well as a high decibel level, fervency. Have you ever so prayed? Heard anyone so pray (if the latter, how did/do you feel about it)? As for "fervent," it's from Latin "boiling"/"glowing": are these souls boiling mad, glowing hot about something? Yes. What? Have you ever been boiling, glowing about that?))

7. The Stoic & British gentleman are diametrical both to these under-the-altar souls & to Revelator John. I heard Nehru's roommate at Oxford say that N., when there, once said to his roommate, "I've figured out the secret of the British Empire. You learn to make & hold a stone face." Chances are those preacher-souls under the altar wouldn't have gotten themselves killed if they'd had the stone faces of the Romans who killed them. The Romans were writing reports while Jn. was writing a "revelation"! Inspiring & institution comport not well together. ...It was a sad 4th-c. day when Chrysostom asked his congregation to be dignified & stop clapping in church. I've often thought of this when in black & hispanic churches, but also last Sunday when, in a usually staid Yankee UCC annual meeting of a Vermont association of churches, the spirit of hilarity & devotional fervor broke forth & we had hours of joy, with complete freedom to clap & expostulate. The "gentleman" surface, thank God, is thin--but also, I correct myself, I would not want to miss the virtues & values of gentlemanliness/ladylikeness.... In 1929, Ruth Kelso did the best job I'm aware of of detailing the roots of the problem: THE DOCTRINE OF THE ENGLISH GENTLEMAN IN THE 16th CENTURY. Then, an Italian humanist, B.Castiglione, drew up the qualifications of the ideal courtier, uniting ethical & intellectual virtues, military & sporting prowess, with easy grace & nonchalance--including the ascent from love of one person to love of the abstract good. The work influenced many British thought-pacers, Sidney, Spencer, & Shakespeare among them. In the upward-mobile struggle for respectability, every movement that "makes it," including Christianity, takes on upper-class characteristics. The teeter-totter shifts from feeling to thinking. Feeling relates to spiritual power, thinking relates to "the principalities & powers" (good & evil). The more upper-class assimilation, the more worldly power-&-responsibility, the wider the gap between Jesus & the Grand Inquisitor....As (as Voltaire said) we return the compliment by making God in our image, the Hellenistic gentleman (of the NT world) saw gods, God, as pallid, passionless--like them, of course, or at least as they saw themselves. In this mode they badmouthed the whole range of strong feelings, but esp. the negatives: anger, rage, hate, vengeance, in short the feelings disturbing both to the soul (which is to abide in tranquility, equanimity) & to society (it being the obligation of all gentlemen, & not just of government, to maintain the public tranquility against uproar, revolt, revolution, and people "taking the law into their own hands" in vendetta & otherwise).

8. On the contrary, the Hebrew-Jewish ethos did not deny the negative feelings but by various devisings domesticated them. See the concise art., "Vengeance," in THE ENCY. OF THE JEWISH RELIGION (Adama/86); V. is "a Divine prerogative and is part of the system of Divine retribution": "V. is mine" (Deut.32:35), & "He will avenge" (v.44). Human v. is severely "restricted," even grudge bearing being condemned (Lev.19:18). While there's some "savage revenge" in the Bible, there also are "many examples of forbearance and abstention from v."; & the Talmud highly praises one "who forbears and suppresses his natural emotions

of wrath and vindictiveness." If these emotions, note, were not "natural," they could not be considered, as they are (anthropopathically), divine attributes. But reciprocally, these divine attributes are not UN-natural in us; it is rather that they are to be, in almost all cases, inactive in our interhuman behavior. Rev.6:10 is either an acceptable exception or, on the part of the souls or the author or both, bad behavior.

9. Rev. abounds in dramaturgic contrasts as well as conflicts. The altar under which the martyred souls cry out in the agony of outrage is part of the liturgical furnishings of ecstatic heavenly worship: that ecstasy is the context of that agony. And another element of the cosmic worship that begins with chap.4 contains another contrast, a slaughtered Lamb has the authority-power to break the seven seals! Note the consonance, as the Lamb breaks the fifth seal, between the Lamb's sacrifice & that of the under-the-altar martyrs. They, indeed, were martyred for witnessing to the Martyr. Instead of being criticized for praying for vengeance, they (v.11) are given white robes & told to cool it till "the complete number" of martyrs have been killed (a familiar semitic symbol for the termination of a process, the full cup). Further explanation of the number, the white robes, & the Lamb's blood soon follows: chap.7. A further contrast: between the noisy violence of the 6th seal (6:12-17) & the 7th seal's "silence in heaven" (8:1, the seals then immediately overlapped by the seven trumpets).

10. How are the vengeance prayer & the silence in heaven possibly related? Silence comes after the martyrs' thirst for vengeance is sated by the action eventuating from the breaking of the next seal (the 6th, 6:12-17: the martyrs pray that God will punish "the people on earth," v.10, and exactly that happens to "all people," v.15). Note also the emotional identity of heaven (the "anger" of the Throne-Sitter & the Lamb, vv.16f) & earth (the angry tone of the martyrs' prayer, v.6). To Christians under pressures for their witnessing, living in the uncertainty of sporadic persecution from neighbors & government, the Revelator offers two comforts: (1) The vision of their safe-at-last participation in the heavenly liturgy & their all-needs-met dominical guidance, & (2) The satisfaction, soon to be theirs, of knowing that their natural desire for vengeance has been, by gracious divine action, transformed into vindication, which is the objective goal toward which all vengeance desiring by sinners & saints points. (Vengeance is the emotive, vindication is the referential. Note, in your Eng. dictionaries, they are of the same root, Lat. vindic-; then compare/contrast the meanings--also in dictionaries of synonyms.)

11. Most critics, & many of the public, consider "The Seventh Seal" Ingmar Bergman's best film. Is the silence in it in any way(s) a consummation of vengeance/vindication? Is the denouement reflective of any of the themes in our field of meaning (reestablishment of a violated cosmos, retaliatory punishment, retribution, successful judicial defense, reputation restored, atonement made, justification secured, exoneration, absolution, confirmation, an act of vindicating resulting in the state of being vindicated, violated rights reinstated)? If you missed the film, or have only a vague memory of it, rent the VC of it &, seeing it with a few others, discuss it in the light of Rev.6:10 (or in general).

12. We've already observed that worship is Rev.6:10's OUTER context: note now that prayer is its INNER context. Psychiatry speaks of "free-floating" rage (& anxiety &...): in Rev.6:10, vengeance is far from free-floating; it is twice bound, twice grounded. What is common to the two contexts is theocentricity: vengeance belongs to God because God is the vindicator of the righteous, the saints, the martyrs; & no ruptured re-

relationships can be fundamentally restored except by grace and in God; & no liberation from oppression can claim completeness that does not free the delivered from God-waywardness; & no forgiveness uncontexted in the divine forgiveness can claim to have come to term, ground, & root. In the martyrs' PRAYER for vengeance, the fact that they are PRAYING for vengeance, we have the clue: the primary offense of those who abuse the defenseless is against God, whose reputation is at stake (as the prophets never tired of telling God!). If the Judge of all the earth does not do right in the sense of righting, making right, the unjust will fearlessly run riot over the just. Chaos is wrestling cosmos; & unless God executes judgment, vengeance-vindication, justice, chaos (social & spiritual anarchy) will reign. Vengeance, far from being naughty, is not even optional. Those saints under the altar are hot for something necessary. The manifold INTENT of their prayer (an anakephalaiosis, a restoration of God's authority in truth-justice-love) is right on, though the CONTENT (killing off earth's population) seems a trifle excessive. What you pray for may be wayward of the divine will, but your whole being would be wayward if you did not pray, for you would be ec-centric (God being the Center). Dynamically, the prayer is complete when the addressee is named--as Jesus' "Abba,...." Underneath the prayer is your yearning, underneath your yearning is your groaning, in the prayer are words bridging heaven & earth, above your prayer is God's intention in your prayer, & beyond your prayer lies "the restoration of all things" in "the Kingdom-Reign-Realm of God." No failure in prayer can be as great as is the failure to pray; for prayer, the heart of worship, shishkebobs "all things in unity."

13. Revolutions & revolutionary governments engineer & orchestrate the negative emotions. In communist cells in the early 1930s I was taught to hate, what to hate & how to hate, & was given practice in hating--"consciousness-raising" the process came later to be called in other movements. The refining of this raised consciousness into a praxis philosophy (an intellectual architectonics or blueprint for action) came to be buttressed (as in current liberationisms) by "critical consciousness," "critical hermeneutics," & "the hermeneutics of suspicion." By 1934 I had come to take a dim view of all this aversive training (to use a B. F. Skinner term). Yet it undoubtedly has power for good (as, briefly, Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation) as well as evil (Leninism & Hitler's counterLeninism--both panned in the daily one-minute hate in 1984, G.Orwell's Big Brother telling you each noon what to hate for that day for one minute). Big boys can use this psychopolitics to play a rough game: to Khomeini, the USA is "The Great Satan"; to Reagan, the USSR is (was?!) "The Evil Empire." Underpoliticized Christians can be helped to greater political responsibility by Bible study about the down side of (W.Wink) "the principalities & powers" (the down side we see in the Bible's last book, as in Romans 13 we see the up side)....What is being activated in all this is THE MORAL SENSE & SENSITIVITY, without which no society, or even private human relationship, can long endure. When the Revelator wrote, Rome was highly successful in maintaining the public tranquility, the politicomoral order. Not all "the world" then knew "the severity & kindness of God" (Romans 11:22), but all knew the severity of Rome, the swift restoration of order when law with its threatening sanctions was breached: instant punishment, engendering social control by pervasive, high-energy fear.

14. The martyrial crisis, to which Rev.6:10 speaks, was theodic: Why does God let the earth continue on its evil way, persecuting the saints; & "how long" (our verse, & 13 times in OT) will he continue to fail to do what the Roman Empire does so well, viz, let no grass grow between crime & punishment? The delay of the Parousia, the represencing of Je-

sus, rises here in Revelation from puzzle to anguish. Even the dying Jesus had had a momentary flash of doubt about the divine severity: how much more tempted could those threatened with martyrdom be expected to be! And how needed, then, the Revelator's assurance that God's severity, instead of being a delusion, is only delayed ("a little while longer," v.11)!

15. Here the modern interpreter faces a crux, a difficulty not of text but of audience: most of your mainline Christians today believe that God is Love. Love. That's it, just love. In fact, if pressed most of them would agree the proposition is reversible: love is god. I remember a long walk, before the USA got into WWII, with the British NT scholar E.F.Scott, whose THE BOOK OF REVELATION (Scrib/40) had just come out. While a radiantly loving person, he was as morally radiant; "tough love," you might say. Hear him (p.163): "Much of the weakness of our modern religion is due to its failure to acknowledge this fact of judgment." Reminds me of a recent NYC cabbie to whom I'd said (as I say often to cabbies) "How's it between you & God?" ("God" being my favorite subject, I easily pop it out in conversation--just as everybody else easily pops out their favorite subject; which defines your favorite subject as your favorite.) At first he deflected by saying, "I'm still mad at a preacher I heard, said AIDS is a punishment from God. You don't believe that shit, do you?" Here's not the place for my verbatim on that conversation; my point here is that the cabbie could not have thought AIDS a punishment from God because he believed there's not such thing--not AIDS; divine punishment. Then he said, "I guess God for me is the lights coming on every night all over New York. Yeah, that's about it." When I teach the Bible, I can count on a number, in any group, considering the subject of divine judgment outré, out of bounds, outlandish, incredible. Judgment is out along with God's wrath & vengeance, & all the negative feelings associated with that paradigm are also outré. Along with the prosperity-&-health preachers, these emotionally crippled Christians are not able to appreciate the positive value of negative thinking-feeling (& in this are like B.F.Skinner in "positive reinforcement," a social psychology that became farcical in his communal experiment, "Walden II").Background for this Thinksheet, but esp. for the present section, can be found in #974 (in which this: "'Punishment' is about hope."), #1513. 4&6, & #2055 ("....: On Being Honest to Vengeance"; sec.3 discusses the verb, EK-dik., the "OUT-working," & thus sociopolitical restoration, of dike, cosmos-justice-judgment, the vb. in 6:10 virtually all Eng. translations throughout the history of the Eng. Bible render "avenge"; the adjacent vb., krin., is more common: "judge," "vindicate," "sit in judgment"). People who've repressed their negative feelings to below the level of acceptability (by internal censorship of what's "naughty," "bad," "evil"), & moreso those who've done it (psychopathically) to below the level of consciousness, cannot relate to a God, or to human beings, who haven't. They see their morality as above such a God & such people. The ignorant arrogance of this moral superiority has disastrous personal & social consequences. (A tragicomic one: Instead of getting "mad" at the preacher, the congregation fires him. Another: The neurotic scruple against capital punishment permits major drug-pushers, who are in effect mass murderers, to live &, by recidivism, continue their devastation, esp. of our ghettos & barrios.)

16. Distaste for the full range of human feelings-passions is one root of antisemitism-antijudaism &, since God is at least emotionally Jewish, antichristianism. By the same token, Revelation is emotionally unavailable to many in our churches as well as out. Under the control of apatheia, what's to be made of Revelation's riotous, uncensored, heart-&-gut-&-brain-&-mind storming of heaven & earth, in love & hate, ecstasy,

*It's a faith crisis: What happens next & next will validate-vindicate, or invalidate (prove illlusion), the martyr's faith, & Jesus' faith. If the "Despot" is "holy & true," martyrs must be avenged in God's punishing the victimizers.

& agony, shouts of adoration (chaps.4f) & cries for vengeance (6:10, intercession to curse & not bless, prayers for bad news--parallel, in primitive religions, with black magic, the evil eye, etc.)? Upper-or-even-middle-class whites, who've an acquired, learned low-affect, are embarrassed even to be in Afro-American Christian worship: Revelation is, for them, even worse! (Yes, "low affect" is a psychiatric term.)

17. Are those under-the-altar souls guilty of bad behavior (see sec.8f & passim)? Consider: (1) Rev. is not an ethical essay but crisis literature, a genre given not to nuance but to black/white exaggeration. 6:10 sounds like a prayer for global holocaust, humanity irrationally viewed as totally irredeemable (as Hitler viewed the Jews), though in fact living Christians would be viewed by those souls, in a cooler mood, as a redeemed portion of humanity. (So, not all earthlings, but worldlings. G. B.Caird, THE REV. OF ST.JN. THE DIVINE, H&R/66, 87f: "qualitative, not quantitative." M.Wilcox, I SAW HEAVEN OPENED: THE MESSAGE OF REV., IVP/75, 72: "all people who are hostile to the church." Caird.113: earth-inhabitants "because they have made themselves utterly at home in this transient world order," idolatrizing earth-life & so viewing earth-death as "the ultimate tragedy." E.S-Fiorenza, THE BOOK OF REV.: JUSTICE AND JUDGMENT, Fortress/85, 63: "all people hostile to the church."...(2) The cry for vindication is a traditional form & should so be read by "composition criticism" (Fiorenza.164). On Rev.'s split stage, the martyr's bodies remain on the earth-altar of Caesar, but their souls fly to the heaven-altar, which is archetypal (cf. Mar.Polycarp 14:2)....(3) The earth-lawcourt has let the martyrs down, & the heaven-lawcourt has lifted their souls up: the social context is juridical, & either the Christians or their accusers will be condemned (so, later, seven visions of recompense)--a setting enriched by the traditional motif of world cataclysm (6:1-7:17). (Caird. 84f: the language is not of "private revenge" but of "public justice.")....(4) Shift attention from what the souls are asking G to do to what they themselves are doing in the prayer. They are expressing faith in (a) God the Righteous, "a steadfast clinging to the power of God in the face of oppression" (R.L.Jeske, REVELATION FOR TODAY: IMAGES OF HOPE, Fortress/83, 70; & "a concern for God's reputation in the world rather than a concern for personal revenge"--Pss.42:9f; 79:10; 94:1-3); & faith in (b) the counter-power, against Rome, of martyrdom: "the death of the martyrs is the means by which God is to win his victory over the powers of evil" (Caird.87). Caird.84: "The same divine alchemy which could turn the Cross into the victory of the Lamb and the four horsemen into ministers of grace can transmute a violent death into the sacrificial offering of a life in worship and service to God": the Christus Victor theme countering "the principalities & powers."....(5) Context the 6:10 prayer also in the altar/blood/ground biblical tradition. Abel's blood cries out to God from the ground in both OT & NT: are the altar souls of 6:10 crying out, or is it their blood? & would that make a difference in our reading of 6:10? W.Milligan (in loco, E.B., S.S.Scranton/10) claims they're Jewish martyrs, & it's their blood crying out, for "the wrong done to them demands reparation"--the focus being not on those to be punished but on their evil deeds in effecting the martyrdoms; & argues that Christian martyrs would bless, not curse, as early Christianity was a martyr-minded community dying for the world's blessing. (Cp. the many commentators who contrast, with 6:10, the forgiveness theme in the deaths of Jesus & Stephen.)....(6) Read the martyrs' prayer in light of Jn.'s aim to deepen his reader-hearers' alienation from "the world," to "stiffen their morale," "to thicken the wall between the Church and the world" (W.E.Elliott, SANCTIONS IN THE CONTROL-LITERATURE OF POSTAPOSTOLIC-PRECATHOLIC CHRISTIAN LEADERS, U.of Chicago PhD/54, 39f; Jn. "cries out against the growing tendency of the churches to settle down in this world").