

# God's vengeance... to wipe away the tears of the oppressed: a reading of Revelation 6:10\*

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## Abstract:

In times of crisis and conflict, when injustice and impunity cast a pall over the land, Christians can experience a common feeling: the wish that God intervene in history and bring justice, which does not seem to come through human efforts alone. However, this longing for justice can hide a certain desire for revenge. That is the feeling of the slaughtered people of Revelation 6:10 who cry out to God for revenge. This article proposes, from the analysis of the biblical book, that the way that God responds to the victims' clamor of vengeance is not by attacking the oppressors but by wiping away the tears of the oppressed, giving them consolation and comfort. From the point of view of the relationship between *orthopraxis* and *orthodoxy*, it implies that, by the ecclesial community, assume as a first response this way of God's acting, that is to say, to offer effective comfort and relief to victims.

**Keywords:** Book of Revelation, Apocalypticism, Divine Justice, God's Vengeance, Victims, Revelation 6:10.

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## La venganza de Dios... enjugar las lágrimas de los oprimidos: una lectura de Apocalipsis 6,10

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### Resumen:

En tiempos de crisis y conflicto, en que la injusticia y la impunidad están presentes, los cristianos pueden experimentar un sentir común: el deseo de que Dios intervenga en la historia y ejerza la justicia que, por vías humanas, parece no llegar. No obstante, dicho anhelo de justicia puede ocultar cierto deseo de venganza. Tal es el sentir de los “degollados” de Apocalipsis 6,10 que claman a Dios por venganza. El presente artículo propone, a partir del análisis del texto bíblico, que el modo como Dios responde al clamor de venganza por parte de las víctimas no es atacando a los opresores sino enjugando las lágrimas de los oprimidos, dándoles consuelo. Desde el punto de vista de la relación entre *ortopraxis* y *ortodoxia*, ello implica, por parte de la comunidad eclesial, asumir como respuesta primera este modo de actuar de Dios, es decir, la responsabilidad de ofrecer consuelo eficaz a las víctimas.

**Palabras clave:** Apocalipsis, Apocalíptica, Justicia Divina, Venganza de Dios, Víctimas, Apocalipsis 6,10.

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## Vengeance de Dieu ... Essuyer les larmes des opprimés: Une lecture de Apocalipsis 6,10

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### Résumé:

En temps de crise et de conflits, l'injustice et l'impunité sont présents, les chrétiens peuvent éprouver un sentiment commun: le désir que Dieu intervient dans l'histoire et la justice de l'exercice, pour la manière humaine, il semble arriver. Cependant, ce désir de justice peut se cacher certain désir de vengeance. Tel est le sentiment de la « décapitation » de l'Apocalypse qui crie à 6,10 Dieu de vengeance. Cet article propose, basée sur l'analyse du texte biblique, la façon dont Dieu répond au cri de vengeance par les victimes ne sont pas attaquer les oppresseurs mais en essuyant les larmes des opprimés, en leur donnant le confort. Du point de vue de la relation entre l'orthopraxie et l'Orthodoxie, cela implique, par la communauté ecclésiale, de prendre comme une première réponse acte ainsi de Dieu, à savoir la responsabilité de fournir un soulagement efficace aux victimes. Introduction: The divine justice as the hope for many oppressed people

**Mots-clés:** Apocalypse, Apocalyptic, Justice Divine, Vengeance de Dieu, Victimes, Apocalypse 6,10.

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According to Gutiérrez (1979, p.106), there is a strong relationship between *doxa*<sup>1</sup> and *praxis*. That means that our way of thinking should be reflected in our way of acting. In other words, our ethics is a reflection of our mental conception of reality. Likewise, it is possible to state the same in the religious field: our image of God could be reflected in our action in the world and in the way we treat other people. For example, if, as Christians, we believe that there is a hierarchy in the relationship between the Three Divine Persons (*heterodoxy* called subordinationism), it will be reflected in our way to treat the others as masters and slaves (*heteropraxis*). Conversely, if we believe that there is a same rank among the three divine persons and all of them deserve “the same adoration and glory” (formulation of *orthodoxy* called *perichoresis*), we could be expected to treat other people as equals (*orthopraxis*)<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, this does not only happen inside the church, but mainly in daily life. Briefly stated, our religious images affect our social, and even, our political relationships<sup>3</sup>.

In this sense, in the middle of different conflicts, when violence, oppression, and sorrow are perpetrated against religious people, it is common to hear them asking to God for justice and vindication, especially when “human justice” does not seem to come and there is impunity and desperation. However, what does “divine justice” (in the level of *doxa*) mean? Is it possible that it involves a feeling of vengeance (in the level of *praxis*)? Indeed, it is very understandable to have this kind of feelings facing the injustice, the oppression and the violation of human rights. This is also a way of *catharsis* (Zúñiga Valerio, 2015, p.56). The problem is in the level of the *praxis* when we want to enact justice (or seek vengeance?) by our own hands in the name of divine justice and we want to use God against the others.

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1 I am using here the term δόξα in its basic classical Greek meaning as “opinion” (not in its *koiné* meaning as “glory”).

2 In this regard, Panikkar “makes use of a new concept, *orthopraxis*, to refer to two expressions of faith and belief that can neither be mixed together nor be entirely separated: doctrine and morality. The former identifies faith with *orthodoxy*, adherence to a correct doctrine (...). The latter expression, morality, insists on the moral character of the religious act, the supremacy of the good, tending to identify faith with a certain correct moral behavior (*orthopoiesis*)” (Fundación Vivarium Raimon Panikkar, 2010). Meanwhile, Parra (1996, pp. 187-192) says that the language of the dogmatic about the Trinity is the *performative* language of the ecclesial community. Therefore, what is said or rejected about the Trinitarian doctrine, proportionally, is said or rejected about the ecclesial community. For that reason, for the Fathers of the Church, the Church is *icon* of Trinity.

3 Of course, there are exceptions and these are produced when our actions contradict our thoughts. This is the beginning of a kind of “*ontological schizophrenia*”. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1965) talks about this by saying that this “split between the faith and the daily live deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age” (GS 43).

In fact, the biblical tradition is no stranger to this reality, and it is possible to find different texts where the demand for God's justice involves a strong feeling of vengeance. The best example of this are the so called "Psalms of vengeance," where the psalmist wishes the worst catastrophes for his enemies in the context of a temporal retribution theology (Cfr. Psalms 5:11; 10:15; 31:18; 54:7; 68:7; 59:12; 69:23-29; 79:12; 83:10-19; 104:35; 109:6-20; 125:5; 137:7-9; 139: 19-22; 140: 10-12). Even apocalyptic literature of extra-biblical texts has stronger expressions in the context of the battle between the children of light and children of darkness (García Martínez, 2009, pp. 95-125).

## 1. Revelation 6:10: The divine justice as vengeance

### 1.1 The text

In this framework, I would like to refer to one of the passages that I find most shocking in the canonical book of Revelation: In the context of the opening of the "seven seals" (Rev 6:1-8:5), when the "Slaughtered Lamb" opens the fifth seal, the seer describes the vision in the following way: "I saw under the altar<sup>4</sup> *the lives* (τὰς ψυχὰς) of those who had been slain because of<sup>5</sup> the word of God and the testimony they have maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord (δεσπότης<sup>6</sup>), holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth<sup>7</sup> and *avenge* (ἐκδικεῖς<sup>8</sup>) our blood?" (Rev 6:9-10 NIV). Through them, it is possible

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4 According to the sacrificial theology of Judaism, the blood of the victim must flow to the foot of the altar (Lv 4:7; Ex 29:12), for which the altar had special channels. And since "life is in the blood" (Lv 17:11,14), we can say that the same martyr, represented by his bloodshed, was at the altar (Stam, 2003, p. 72).

5 According to Zúñiga Valerio (2015, p. 67), the preposition διὰ, followed of two accusatives nouns (τὸν λόγον and τὴν μαρτυρίαν), shows clearly the cause or reason ("because of") why the righteous are slaughtered: Their fidelity to the word of God and their testimony. In a context of repression, they were murdered because they were faithful with their convictions. That is, their *orthodoxy* was coherent with their *orthopraxis*.

6 The title δεσπότης points to someone who has total authority over others and it was often applied to the master of slaves. The title had also a political meaning and it was used to refer to the Roman emperor, because of his absolute power and his deification (Stam, 2015, p. 74).

7 "The inhabitants of earth" (κατοικούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) is a common expression to refer to the unbelievers, in contrast with the saints (See Rev 3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8.12.14; 17:2.8).

8 It is noteworthy that ἐκδικεῖω (lit. to avenge, to vindicate) has the same root of δικαιοσύνη (lit. righteousness, uprightness, justice). The verb ἐκ-δικεῖω, lit "from/make



to hear the cry of all the innocent victims throughout history. Their voices are the voices of all those who have been persecuted, oppressed, displaced, silenced and murdered; of all who seem to be forgotten by God or, at least, these are their feelings (Zúñiga Valero, 2015, p.65). From Abel (Gen 4:9) to our days, their blood is crying out to God from the ground<sup>9</sup>. The life (τὰς ψυχὰς) of those murdered is blood that cries: its sacrifice becomes a word pronounced in front of the throne. The crying expresses the impatience of the “glorified martyrs” and of the faithful people on earth. It has a theodicy deep problem: If God is sovereign, holy and true, how is it possible to explain the long delay of his justice? (Stam, 2003, 74).

On the other hand, the inhabitants of the earth, the victorious riders, have shaped history. But before them rises the authentic δεσπότης (Lord) to whom the

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justice”, means “to vengeance for something of somebody” and this “somebody” are the ἐκ τῶν κατοκούντων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, lit, “those who have their home on earth” (Zúñiga Valerio, 2015, p. 68).

9 In the text it is also present a Jewish tradition that starts from the story of Cain and Abel, according to which all the bloodshed unjustly cries out to God from the earth (Gn 4,10) (Stam 2003, p. 72). In this sense, in 1En 22.5-7 is written: <sup>5</sup> “I beheld dead men appealing, and the sound of it advanced up to heaven and it was appealing.<sup>6</sup> And I asked Raphael the angel who was with me, and I said to him, ‘This appealing spirit, who is it, why in this way is the sound of it advancing and appealing up to heaven?’ <sup>7</sup> And he replied to me saying, “This spirit is the one coming out from Abel who murdered Cain the brother, and Abel appealing concerning him until his seed is destroyed from the face of earth, and his seed should disappear from the seed of men”. (Charlesworth, 2010, p. 258)

vanquished cry. They cry out with faith and do not let the system silence them. (Pikaza, 2010, p. 98). Moreover, it is noteworthy that the martyrs do not seem worried about themselves, but only about their brothers who are still alive, and the well being that is necessary to reestablish on earth (Vanni, 1998, p. 104).

In this regards, Shüssler Fiorenza (1998, p.92) says that, Biblical Scholars, who usually do not suffer an unbearable oppression or any troubled by the apparent permissiveness and wickedness of God, tend to define this cry for justice as non-Christian and contrary to the gospel. However, we can only evaluate in theological terms this central question of Revelation if we are able to understand the anguish caused by that cry for justice and divine vengeance, which restore many lives lost and all the blood spilled uselessly.

However, what is curious in this passage is the way their cry is answered: "Then each of them was given (ἐδόθη) a white robe (στολή λευκή), and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been" (Rev 6:11 NIV). We do not have here a direct answer to their demands: The narrator does not tell us how long it will be until the Lord judges the inhabitants of the earth and avenges the blood of the victims. The response is very realistic. It does not give them false expectations. The oppression will continue and there will be more murdered people. Nevertheless, oppression is not forever. They only have to hope. And the sign of their hope is the white robe that they have received (the greek verb ἐδόθη, in its passive form shows that is God the subject of the action), which will prepare them for the time of the "vengeance," just before the opening of the seventh seal (Cfr. Rev 7:9-17).

## 1.2 Literary context: "The seven seals"

According to the structure of the Book of Revelation, the seer's vision takes place in the second septenary, the so-called "Septenary of the seals", just after the "Septenary of the letters addressed to the seven churches" (Rev 1:9-3:22) and before the "Septenary of the trumpets" (Rev 8:1-9:21)<sup>10</sup>. The gradual opening of the seals prepares us for the revelation of the meaning of the Book that the Slaughtered

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<sup>10</sup> Actually, the "Septenary of the trumpets" is part of the "seventh seal" (cfr. Ayuch, 2004; Tavo, 2005).

Lamb has in his hands (Rev 5:6-10; 6:1); that is, the sense of history and of present situation of oppression (Shüssler Fiorenza, 1998, p. 93). Besides, it is possible to find a literary pattern in the first four scenes of each septenary. Each of these scenes is very short; containing no more than two verses each. The fifth scene, then, points to a novelty that must be understood in the light of the whole septenary, and of the entire book of Revelation.

In this sense, the sixth seal (Rev 6:12-17) describes seven natural catastrophes: There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place (Rev 6:12-14 NIV).



Then it shows how such disasters affect seven groups of people on earth: "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains" (Rev 6:15 NIV). Upon a cursory, first reading, one could think that this description corresponds to the fullness of the claim of the victims who are below the altar, and that this is the vengeance of God for which they have asked. Violence of the disaster could be the way by which God brings them justice. Nevertheless, the key words to understand the vision are at the end of the seal: "...the great day of their wrath has come" (Rev 6:17 NIV). Therefore, the scene is related to the

“Lord’s day,” the *kairotic* and eschatological day when God will bring justice to all and will fulfill the prescriptions for the jubilee year, the “great *Shabbat*,” when the dispossessed will recover their land, liberation will be announced to all the inhabitants of the land and each one will take care of his or her neighbor (Cfr. Lv 25:8-17). In fact, this is a very important motive in the prophetic writings where cosmic signals such as earthquakes, the trembling of the heavens, the darkening of the sun and moon announce the coming of the Lord’s day: “Before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine. The Lord thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty is the army that obeys his command. The day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?” (Joe 2:10-11; also Mal 3,2 NIV). Accordingly, the day of the Lord will bring justice and liberation for all, rather than simply bring bad consequences upon the oppressors of history.

At the end of the scene, the climax of the sixth seal, we can see the crowd wearing white robes (στολὰς λευκάς) and holding palm branches (φοίνικες) in their hands, crying out again. But this time their cries are different. They praise God and the Lamb (Cfr. Rev 7:9-10). This image shows the concrete realization of the divine justice accomplished in the day of the Lord. This consists in the vindication of the victims and the oppressed, the recovering of their dignity, and their reintegration into the cultic assembly, symbolized by the palm branches which evoke the feast of *sukkot* (Vergara & Vásquez, 2015, pp. 96-105). In effect, the 7:15 says that God “will shelter them with his presence”, which is the deep meaning of the feast of Tabernacles, the celebration and realization of the *Shekinah*, the divine presence dwelling among the people (in remembrance of the meeting between God and Moses in the “tent of meeting” Suggestion pointing to the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, according to Ex 33: 7-11). Therefore, they will not be afraid neither will feel themselves alone, because they will know that God is dwelling among them (as in Jo 1,14b). And, finally, the text says: “God will wipe away (ἐξαλείψει) every tear from their eyes” (Rev 7:17c NIV).

At the end of the book, regarding the vision of the New creation and future Jerusalem, we find exactly the same motives: the dwelling of God among human beings (remembering the words of the covenant), fulfilling the expectation of the feast of *sukkot*, and wiping away the tears from their eyes: “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain, because the old order of things has passed” (Rev 21:3-4 NIV).





## **2. God's vengeance as consolation of the oppressed**

It is very interesting that the Greek verb *ἐξαλείψω* (lit. wipe away, eliminate and erase, according to Balz & Schneider, 2001, 1422), used here to show that God “will wipe away” the tears from the eyes of the people, is also used in the *Septuagint* in relation with God’s decision to eliminate or destroy the evil that resides over the earth and over his people. So, in Gn 7:4, before the flood, God says: “I will wipe (*ἐξαλείψω*) from the face of the earth every living creature I have made”. Fulfilling his words Gn 7:23 says: “Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out (*ἐξήλειψεν*); people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and birds were wiped (*ἐξηλείφθησαν*) from the earth”. In Ex 17:14, after the battle against the Amalekites, God says to Moses “I will completely blot out (*ἐξαλείψω*) the name of Amalek from under heaven”. In Dt 9:14, after the sin of the people in the desert, God wants to destroy them and tells Moses: Let me alone, so that I may destroy them and blot out (*ἐξαλείψω*) their name from under heaven. (Deu 9:14). The same verb is used to indicate that God can blot somebody out from his book: “Please forgive their sin; but if not, then

blot me out (ἐξάλειψόν με) of the book you have written" (Ex 32:32; a similar case is in Rev 3:5). Furthermore, in Psalm 51, the Psalmist uses the verb to ask the Lord to blot out his transgressions (see Psalm 51:3; also Is 43:25)<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, it is possible to say that the use of the verb ἐξάλειψω, which is commonly used to show how God practices justice by eliminating a negative reality, means in Rev 7:17 that the tears of people's eyes are a negative reality that must be eliminated because they have been caused the injustice and oppression.

On the other hand, the cry of the victims in Rev 6:10 evokes the apocalyptic vision of Zec 1:12 in which the Lord's angel exclaim: "Lord Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, with which you have been angry with these seventy years?" The answer of the Lord is very similar to the vision in Revelation: "So the Lord spoke kind and comforting words () to the angel" (Zec 1:13). At the end of the vision there is an oracular promise: "The Lord will again comfort (נָחַם) Zion and choose Jerusalem" (Zec 1:17 NIV). Likewise, the apocalyptic vision of Dn 8:13-14 says:

Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long (ἕως τίνος) will it take for the vision to be fulfilled - the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the Lord's people?". He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings<sup>12</sup>; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated".

As in Revelation, both the vision from Zechariah and Daniel (see, also, Psalm 79:5,10; 1En 47.2-7; 4Esd 4.35-37; 6.59; 2Bar 21.19) contain a plea to God, stating that God will end the time of oppression and God will answer this plea with compassion, consolation and restoration. In the same sense, in Third Isaiah, in the context of the return from the Exile and of the prophet's mission, it is possible to find a close relationship between the same motives present in the vision in Revelation: The Lord's day, the vengeance of God, and the consolation of the people who are crying: "The Lord has anointed me... To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of *vengeance* (יְהִי מִתְקַן מִיָּדָי) of our God, to *comfort* all who mourn" (Isa 61:2 NIV).

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11 In all these cases, the Masoretic Text uses the verb נָחַם.

12 1150 days if the expression refers to the two daily sacrifices suspended during the time of persecution.

Therefore, thanks to the literary context of Revelation 6:10 and to the Old Testament references, it is possible to say that God hears the prayer for vengeance (See Rev 18:20; 19:2), but this does not mean that he confirms it in the same level. In light of the slain Lamb, it is possible to state that God has wrought vengeance not in a vindictive way, but in a loving gesture that overcomes the hate and violence of history (Pikaza, 2010, p. 98).

## Conclusions

In summary, Rev 6:10-7:17 does present God's vengeance, but, in contrast with the traditional apocalyptic perspective where children of darkness should be eliminated, this vengeance does not consist in the violent destruction of the oppressors. Neither his vengeance gives false expectations about the end of all conflict to victims. God's vengeance consists overall in that God, on his day (that is in kairoic time that does not depend upon human beings) brings justice to the oppressed, dwelling among them, wiping away their tears and consoling them. Accordingly, it is possible to say that God's vengeance consists in the consolation of victims and persecuted.

Now, returning to the question about the relationship between *doxa* and *praxis*, it is possible to say that, at the level of the *orthodoxy*, as with the people in the vision from Revelation, each one has the legitimate right to think that God could be vindictive, especially when they are in the middle of situations of crisis, violence or oppression. God's vengeance, however, does not consist in the destruction of the others but in the consolation of those who suffer. Therefore, at the level of the *orthopraxis* it is necessary to understand that our role cannot be in opposition to the one of the oppressors (because they are also human beings, children of God) but rather our role needs to be against oppression, staying with the oppressed, providing them consolation and showing them that God is dwelling among them, wiping away their tears. This does not mean to renounce the claim for human justice (not as vengeance but as the vindication of the victims). God's vengeance in a biblical sense means seeking the truth, working for restoration and the warranty that violence will not be repeated because working for the kingdom of God implies the effort to eliminate (ἐξάλειψω) both, the reality of injustice and oppression, and the sorrow and suffering of the oppressed. The cry of the victims should continue to be heard as a symbol of their memory, as an expression of our need for social justice, and as a promise to avoid the recidivism of violent acts. And, like a "first aid," the consolation of victims is the first

step in this process and the first expression of an *orthopraxis* among Christian communities.

*“He will swallow up death forever.  
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.  
He will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth.  
The Lord has spoken”.*

(Isa 25:8)

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