What is new about the “new song” of Rev. 5: 9; 14: 3?

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The purpose of this article is to study the meaning of the "new song" Rev. 5:9 and 14:3 in relation to the 144,000 and other redeemed believers in a worship setting in the Book of Revelation. The work will also briefly look into the identity of the 144,000. The concept of "new" within the selected passages of the Scriptures will be studied in order to determine how the word was used and understood by the primary, intended audiences. The Greek language has several words for "new," but this work will limit itself to two words, namely, kainos and neos. We will briefly ascertain the meanings of those words, and their relations.

1. The meaning of the words kainos and neos.

The word "new" in New Testament Greek language appears several times, and it carries several connotations. We shall limit our discussions to two words, namely, kainos and neos. The word neos will be mentioned briefly because it is not relevant to our discussion. The reason for this limitation is that the word kainos appears in both Rev. 5: 9 and 14: 3.

1.1 Kainos

The word kainos means new in nature with an implication of something better. In the context of salvation, the word kainos signifies a new and stupendous thing that
the epoch of salvation has brought. It is thus a crucial term in eschatological promise. For example, the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1; 2 Pet. 3:13), the new Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12; 21:2), the new wine in Mark. 14:25, the new name in Rev. 2:17; 3:12, the new song in Rev. 5:9, the new creation in Rev. 21:5. That new creation, which is the aim of hope, finds expression already in Christian life (2 Cor. 5:17). The new era has been ushered with Jesus Christ. In him Jews and Gentiles are but one new man (Eph. 2:15). Jesus Chris's followers are to put on the new nature that they are given (Eph. 4:24).

God’s saving plan is worked out in the promised new covenant that Jesus has now set up (Luke. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:8ff.; 9:15). That is a better covenant (Heb. 7:22), unfailing (8:7), eternal (13:20), anchored on superior promises (8:6). The fact that the old and the new are mentioned separately in (Mark. 2:21-22), emphasizes the element of distinctiveness. The new commandment of love has been anchored and founded in Christ’s own love (John. 13:34); it is new without being unprecedented (1 John. 2:7-8).

1.2 Neos

There is another word for new which is often used in the New Testament, namely, νεος. The word means that which belongs to the present, that which has the shade of unfamiliar and young. The word may connote the peculiar or unexpected but also a new state or position.

The word neos does not carry an eschatological content and meaning in the New Testament. It points to the new reality of present salvation. The new wine of Mark 2:22 represents the new element in the person and message of Jesus (cf. Mt. 12:6,
41-42; Lk. 4:21; Mk. 10:6ff.). The old age and the new are opposites. The community, as the new leaven, must keep itself pure from earlier sins (1 Cor. 5:6ff.) so as to be in its conduct what it really is. As Christ, the new man, is present, so is the new being of the Christian, and this must express itself in daily regeneration (Col. 3:9-10).

2. The "New Song" of Rev. 5:9.

John, in Rev. 5, introduces us to a tension within the throne room. The challenge had been made, and it would seem that there was no one to meet that challenge – a person worthy to take the scroll from the One sitting on the throne. John points out that as soon as the solution had been found in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, the Lion-Lamb, the tension was eased by singing of a "new song" of praise. It is possible that the "new song" turned John’s tears of pain into tears of joy, and John himself participated in the singing of the new hymn. The act of expressing joy, praise and worship towards God and the Lamb on the throne echoes and alludes to the Exodus account, with special reference to the providential crossing of the Red Sea.

God, through Moses, eased tension and sense of insecurity of the Israelites at the Red Sea through saving them by destroying their enemies and opening a dry land through the Red Sea. The Egyptians behind them were invincible. The Red Sea in front of them was impenetrable. The wilderness on their side was overwhelming. (Exodus 14: 1-3). The situation facing the Israelites was enough to cause tension in them. They could not fathom any escape out of their problems. It was at that time when their tension
was highest that God chose to intervene on their behalf – the dry land was miraculously opened in the Red Sea, but the Red Sea swallowed the Egyptians (Exodus 14: 30, 31).

The salvation of the Israelites ran parallel with the judgment of the Egyptians. Once more, redemption and judgment are twin sister. In the next chapter (Exodus 15) Moses and Merriam led out in a song intended to praise God. God, in the song of Moses and Merriam, is addressed to as “the Lord” or “O Lord” about 18 times – a pure acknowledgment of God’s Kingship.

The content of the hymn of Moses and Merriam pointed to God as “my salvation” and Redeemer (Exodus 15: 2, 13). He (God) was not only understood as the content of the song of Moses, but also accepted as “my song” (Exodus. 15: 2). The rest of the hymn pointed to God’s strength, might, love, victory, holiness, wonders and sanctuary. Moses concluded his song by mentioning that there is no end to God’s Kingship. He said, “The Lord will reign for ever and ever,” (Exodus 15: 18). The song of Moses and Merriam functioned as an instrument not only to praise, worship and express their understanding of God, but also as a tool to ease their heightened tension.

The song of Moses and Merriam functioned on both anthropological and theological levels. It functioned on the anthropological level in the sense that it provided a solution for a painful, depressing situation. It also functioned on the theological level because Moses and Merriam theologized in song as an expression of their new understanding of God. The same
functions of the songs of Merriam and Moses can be applied to the “new song” of the 4 living creatures, 24 elders, angelic hosts and the rest of the universe (Rev. 5: 9-14 and 14: 3).

On an anthropological level, John is seen as weeping and moaning because it seemed the solution or the dilemma of the sin-infected universe would remain unresolved. On the theological level, after the tension had been eased because of the qualifications of the Lion-Lamb Jesus Christ; the content of the song proceeded to explain what the Lamb was to humankind, and also the role of the Lion in relation to mankind’s redemption. On theological level, Jesus Christ, as qualified by His death to open and break seals, is accepted not only as the Redeemer, but also as God worthy to receive worship and praise. The “newness” in the song occurs on this level.

The song is not only new because of its eschatology;¹ not new only because it points to the “New Age”;² not new only in the sense of “time (neos)” but with regards to “quality (kainos)”³ of the song; not new only because “it has deep roots in the Old Testament messianic psalms;⁴ not new only because it “focuses on the future eschatological exodus of the triumphant

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church out of this world in order to serve God on the earth made new;”\(^5\) not a new song only because “Christ's death has inaugurated a new era”\(^6\) or rather only points to “his work”\(^7\) or that a song “will never grow old,”\(^8\) but it is a new song in the sense that the content of the "new song" has been tabernacle by a new Being, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, the Lion-Lamb, because of His qualification, has been revealed, introduced, and formally included as the Member of the Godhead and as the object of worship and praise.

This is a new recognition not only because of Jesus Christ as the “pre-existent logos,”\(^9\) but also that He qualified by becoming the Passover Lamb in order for judgment to pass-over sinners, but consumed sin which the Lamb bore on His body and conscience. The song is new because worship is also directed at Jesus Christ because, in essence, He accomplished the redemptive mission of saving humankind.

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The newness is more of a new or fresh approach and focus, and a new divine revelation (rather than a new God) in worship where Jesus Christ is included in the Godhead – resulting to two Divine Beings sharing the throne and Kingship, Deity or Godhead, and receiving worship, while maintaining and upholding the full and fundamental understanding and acceptance of Jewish monotheism, and also being endorsed by John's usage of “the singular pronoun autō”\(^{10}\) - despite the fact that it is referring to two Divine Beings but referred to as One God in Rev. 11:15.

The “new song,” points to the Kingship of God as demonstrated in that God the Father chooses to Majestically assume a low profile on the throne while the limelight focuses or falls on Jesus Christ in order to affirm and draw attention to the newness in a “new song.” The “new song” is then sung by or receives acceptance from the 4 living creatures, 24 elders, angelic hosts and the entire inhabitants of the universe – affirming that Jesus Christ is indeed God. Barnhouse\(^{11}\) fascinated and overwhelmed by the voices of those who were singing a "new song," acclaimed:

“Never will such music have been heard in the universe. Never will so many voices have intoned such mighty praise. The armies of armies come to the last note. The mightiest of God’s creatures sound the amen. We gaze upon the scene with no voice for utterance and, prostrate, we worship the Lord Jesus Christ who now proceeds to the most awful scenes of judgement with actions that are rooted in His cross.”


In Revelation 4 God receives honour, glory, praise and wisdom because He is the Creator. In Revelation 5 Jesus Christ, the Lion-Lamb is deemed worthy to receive praise and worship because He re-created mankind through His blood, death, and resurrection. Bullinger’s analysis of the combined songs is worth noting especially that it points to two phases, namely, ransom (price for redemption) and power (the act of saving or rescuing the captive). He said,

“But the payment of the price is only one part of the work of redemption. If the price be paid and there be no power to take possession and eject the holder the payment is in vain. And if power be put forth and exercised in casting out the usurper, without the previous payment of the redemption price, it would not be a righteous action. So that for the redemption of the forfeited inheritance two things are absolutely necessary, price and power. The first redemption song has for its theme the payment of the price. The second celebrates the putting forth of the power.”

It is clear from Bullinger’s statement that the song does not only point to our redemption and that of other saints, but also to the victory over the powers of Satan. The Lamb does not only pay a price for our salvation, but He frees us from power and dominion of the enemy in order for us to be free to be subjects of the Creator-King, God. He sets us free from the dominion of sin in order for us to be free to accept His Lordship and Kingship.

From the standpoint of His redemption on behalf of us, doing His Decalogue become a delight to us. God, through His agent – Jesus Christ,

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not only saves us, but also Lords over us as our King. Achtemeier\textsuperscript{13} views Rev. 5: 1-14 as the “climax and heart” of the Book of Revelation because its contents are seeds that germinate throughout the entire text of the Apocalypse of John – ranging from themes of creation, Parousia, hope of the saints, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to cleansing and renewing the sin-infected world. God establishes His Kingship through the blood, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paulien\textsuperscript{14} observed a “deliberate progression of thought in the five hymns” prior to breaking of the seven seals. He remarked,

“Two hymns are addressed to the Father (4: 8, 11). The next two are addressed to the Lamb (5:9-10, 11-12). The fifth and final hymn is addressed to both the Father and the Lamb (5:13). That the equality of praise is the explicit highlight of this backdrop is evident from the ever-increasing volume of participants. The hymn of 4:8 is sung by the four living creatures alone. The hymn of 4:11 is sung by the 24 elders. The hymn of 5:9-10 is sung by both the living creatures and the elders. With the hymn of 5:11-12, scores of millions of angels join the heavenly choir. The fifth and final hymn (5:13) is sung by all creation. This ever-increasing participation indicates that it is heaven’s greatest joy to exalt Jesus Christ even as His Father is exalted (cf. John 5:23).”


\textsuperscript{14} Jon Paulien, “The Seven Seals,” *Symposium on Revelation – Book 1, Daniel & Revelation Series*, vol. 6, edited by Frank B. Holbrook (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), p 207.
In deed, it is God’s pleasure to establish His Kingship through and share it with Jesus Christ. The Lion-Lamb establishes God’s Kingdom not by conquest, but by His blood, death and resurrection. The paradox of it all is that it is in death or martyrdom that Jesus Christ becomes victorious. It seems that G. F. Handel’s “Worthy is the Lamb” at the conclusion of his song *Messiah* demonstrated that he had caught the gleams of the Lion-Lamb receiving homage because of what He had accomplished through His meritorious death and resurrection. We are now ready to participate in another liturgical hymn of Rev. 7: 9-12.

3. The "new song" of Rev. 14: 3.

The context of the "new song" of Rev. 14: 3 reveals that the 144,000 sing a “new song” which cannot be learned by anyone except them because of their unique experiences. The content of the song is not stated, but it seems that their unique experience qualifies and gives them the special ability and grace to can learn and sing that "new song." The Greek word word “learn” or manqavnw means “to learn, appropriate to oneself… through experience or practice.”

The 144, 000 of Rev. 7 surface again in Rev. 14. They are seen standing on the Mount Zion. A closer examination of Rev. 14: 3-5 reveals that the 144,000 do the following:
“Sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless.”

From the above-quoted passage from the Apocalypse of John we note the following:

(1) The 144,000 sing a “new song” which cannot be learned by anyone except them because their unique experiences. It seems that the “new song” of Rev. 5:9 is different from that of Rev. 14:4 simply because the “new song” of Rev. 14:4 will be learned by the 144,000 based on their experiences. The content of the “new song” is not yet revealed, and any speculation will not help the text. We need to allow God to remain mysterious in His ways and revelation. It is possible that God and Jesus Christ reign supreme in that hidden “new song.”

(2) The 144,000 have “been redeemed from the earth,” meaning that they benefited from the Jesus Christ-event at the Cross through the blood of Jesus Christ. The presupposition is that they participated in and were subjected to the curse brought about by the first Adam at the Garden of

Eden, and they also benefited through the blessings conveyed by the Second Adam, Jesus Christ Himself.\(^\text{16}\)

(3) The 144,000 are the “firstfruits” for God and the Lamb. There were sacrificial “firstfruits” in the Hebrew economy. Those included various animals, both wild and domesticated, and were considered “holy to the divinity and were consecrated before the rest could be put to secular use.”\(^\text{17}\) In Jewish milieu, “firstfruits” were offered both on individual (Deut. 26: 1-11) and corporate levels (Lev. 23: 10, 17).

The motive for giving of “firstfruits” to God was to recognise that God caused good harvest. Ezekiel mentions that God required His people not to delay in offering to Him the “firstfruits” of their ripe fruits, of their sons, oxen and sheep (Eze. 22: 29-31). Paul mentions that if the “firstfruits” of dough are holy so is the rest of the lump of dough (Rom. 11: 16; cf. Num. 15: 18-21). The “firstfruits” are part of the rest of the harvest and also give a foretaste of the entire harvest.

The first converts are referred to as the “firstfruits” (Rom. 16: 5; cf. 8: 22). Paul describes the “firstfruits” in the context of the resurrection of Jesus Christ wherein Jesus Christ is understood and accepted as the “firstfruits” of those who will be resurrected (1 Cor. 15: 20). The 144,000 are part of the first harvest to God. They may be understood as a “tithe” to

\(^\text{16}\) 1 Cor. 15: 22, 45; cf. Rom. 3: 21-24.

the Lord pointing to the truth that there has been a victorious harvest (Mal. 3: 10).

(4) “It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste”- they are virgins. This phrase from Rev. 14: 4 has received several comments ranging from “the most misunderstood words in the book,”18 “John’s puzzling sentence,”19 to “the most enigmatic in the book.”20 The interpretation of this text has evoked robust discussions simply because “John’s words cannot be found elsewhere in Revelation to which they point.”21 Some have argued for ascetic masculinity with the hope to discourage marriage,22 some perceive this text to mean avoidance of sexual immorality,23 and yet others have argued from the perspective of “military and priestly interpretation.”24

24 Olson, “Those Who have Not Defiled Themselves with Women”: Revelation 14: 4 and the Book of Enoch,” p. 494. Olson shows the background of this masculine “military and priestly interpretation” is based on the OT regulations of war which called for sexual abstinence (Deut. 23:9-10; cf. Lev. 15:16; 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:11); and also some have appealed to the “general purity regulations of priests” as per Lev. 15:18 – since the redeemed of Revelation are described as priests (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).
Olson\textsuperscript{25} refutes these approaches simple because those texts refer to temporal sexual abstinence rather than virginity. It appears that the apocalyptic or/and prophetic nature of the text of Revelation frowns and forbids any literal interpretation of the 144,000 – particularly where it is assumed that the 144,000 is composed of males, and also to assume that they are all female virgins who have not involved themselves with men. The Bible often interprets or uses the word “woman” to symbolise or point to the church. A God-fearing woman symbolises the church, and an immoral woman refers to a church that has apostatized.\textsuperscript{26}

The believers are called virgins because they refused to defile themselves with false teachings from the same apostate church [Babylon and her daughters or followers].\textsuperscript{27} Literal interpretation of virginity is not intended in this passage because such an interpretation would contradict the Bible’s approval of marriage union (1 Cor. 7: 1-5).\textsuperscript{28} They are spiritual or figurative virgins. A symbolic interpretation of virgins would be more reasonable and plausible. We need to recognise that Collins\textsuperscript{29} has rightly observed a possible parallel between Rev. 14: 4 with the 1 Enoch’s “Book of the Watchers.”

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\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. p. 495. This author, Olson, points out that the Greek word \textit{parthenoi} “does not refer to a short-term foregoing of sexual relations.”
\textsuperscript{26} Rev. 12: 1; cf. 17: 1-5.
\textsuperscript{27} Rev. 14: 8; 17: 4-5; cf. 2: 20-23; 18: 4; see also
\textsuperscript{28} Nichol, “Revelation,” p. 826.
the 144, 000 based on their experiences. The content of the "new song" is not yet revealed, and any speculation will not help the text. We need to allow God to remain mysterious in His ways and revelation. It is possible that God and Jesus Christ reign supreme in the content of that hidden "new song."

In conclusion, the "newness" in song of Rev. 5:9 is in the new inclusion of the Second Being or Member of the Godhead in order for Him to receive homage and worship. The "newness" of the song of the 144, 000 remains hidden and mysterious, except for their experiences which make them unique, hence their song is new. It is always safer to allow God to remain mysterious so as to remain God to us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


