



The Revelation to John: Lessons from the History of the Book's Reception

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The Revelation to John does not suffer from overpopularity among mainline Protestants. In my own Episcopal church, for example, I am often asked to teach adult education, and lectures on the psalms, gospels, or letters of Paul are always welcome. But offers to speak about Revelation tend to be met with pointed silence. It seems that many of my fellow parishioners would agree with Luther's first assessment of the book (before he discovered its usefulness in his polemic against the Roman church) that "Christ is neither taught nor known in it."¹ There are various reasons for keeping this book at arm's length, for conveniently forgetting just how it is that our canon concludes. For one thing it is full of strange images—a red dragon whose tail knocks stars out of heaven; a sumptuously clothed, drunken whore who holds a golden cup full of abominations; locusts resembling horses in armor that torture human beings. This is not the stuff of lucid sermons or quiet bedtime devotions.

Then there is the problem of the book's violence: the three plague sequences

¹Martin Luther, *Preface to the Revelation of St. John [I]* (1522), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 399.

There is a depth and richness to Revelation that is lost when it is regarded simply as a blueprint for the future. Over time, the book has provided a warrant for protest against oppressive political and religious systems, a guide for life in the present, and a resource for worship.

of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls (Rev 6–9; 11:15–19; 15–16), which describe the impending destruction of mountains, islands, cities, and a vast number of human beings; the vision of the violent overthrow of the whore Babylon; and the blood that issues from the winepress of divine wrath. Further, as if these things weren't enough, there is the company the book keeps, especially here in America: those hugely popular prognosticators of the end time who, with great confidence in their ability to decipher the meaning of every symbol, claim that it is only now, in our own time, that the meaning of the book can be understood at last, because ours is the time when the end-time events have begun.

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When one turns, as I did a few years ago, to the study of the reception history of the Apocalypse—that is, to the many and various ways it has been used and interpreted over the centuries—it comes as a surprise to see how very influential this troublesome book has been. Through the ages John's Apocalypse has been a remarkably popular book, and the history of its reception offers an embarrassment of riches—in media as diverse as ancient sermons, medieval manuscript illustrations, political comment, poetry, song, and film. The interpretations that Christopher Rowland and I surveyed in our commentary are of various types.² Some emphasize the meaning of the text for the past, others its meaning in the present or for the future. Some interpretations can be called “decoding,” while others are more metaphorical in nature. “Decoding” involves presenting the text's meaning in another, less allusive, form—claiming to show what the text *really* means. There is great attention to the details, and usually only one definitive meaning is offered. A metaphorical interpretation, on the other hand, refuses to translate the images but instead relates them to other situations or persons, aiming through this juxtaposition to cast light on that to which the image is applied. Such interpretations seek to convey the *spirit* of the text rather than being preoccupied with the plethora of detail. In contrast to decoding, this does not allow the identification of the image or passage from the Apocalypse solely with one particular historical personage or circumstance. The text is thereby not prevented from being actualized in different ways over and over again.

Why study the reception history of Revelation? Partly because it is fascinating. Partly because it provides a different angle for viewing various historical developments; for example, we can learn something about the Reformation by examining how Protestants and Roman Catholics used images from Revelation to portray each other, or about attitudes of Christians in Muslim-occupied Spain by

²Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

studying the magnificent illustrated manuscripts of the Apocalypse commentary by the monk Beatus. But aside from entertainment and general historical interest, reception history has some lessons to teach us as we seek to interpret this book for our own day.

READING THE SIGNS

One lesson concerns “reading the signs.” In the view of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the authors of the immensely popular *Left Behind* series—and before them of Hal Lindsey, author of the best seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*—the most important questions raised by Revelation are: What time is it? And are the “signs” of the end time predicted in Revelation actually taking place in our own time? Their answer is a clear yes, and they imply that the first concern of contemporary readers should be to ensure that they have a place among the elect—those clothed in white robes ready to meet Christ (Rev 7 and 14)—so that they not be “left behind” when he returns.

Many are convinced, or at least unnerved, by the correspondences such interpreters point out between the visions of Revelation and contemporary events. One simple lesson that can be learned from studying reception history, however, is that our generation is not the first to think that the specific events and realities that we experience are the fulfillment of all that Revelation prophesies. This was conveyed quite clearly when the approach of the year 2000 fueled widespread interest in biblical prophecy, and the book of Revelation in particular. A PBS *Frontline* TV program portrayed a similar rise in eschatological fervor at other points in history, such as the one thousandth birthday of Rome in the third century, and the approach of the year 1000.³ At these times—and in many others in the past—interpreters of Revelation were convinced that the signs were being fulfilled in the disasters and conflicts of their own day. Knowledge of these earlier interpretations of the Apocalypse makes the ingenious decipherings of contemporary decoders less compelling.⁴

“AND I SAW A BEAST RISING OUT OF THE SEA” (REV 13:1): HEARING “WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING TO THE CHURCHES” (REV 2:7)

Biblical scholars today tell us that John’s Apocalypse is, among other things, a protest against the ideology of the Roman Empire in the first century. On one level, the beast from the sea in Rev 13:1 symbolizes the reigning Roman emperor, and the book warns Christians that devotion to emperor and empire compromises their worship of the one true God. Through the ages, many interpreters have explored the book’s implications for social and political life. In the sixteenth century, for example, Anabaptists used texts such as Rev 21–22 to challenge ecclesial polity. In

³“Apocalypse!” in the *Frontline* series, aired in 1999 (written and produced by W. Cran and B. Loeterman; M. L. White, consultant). It is now available on PBS Home Video from www.pbs.org.

⁴For a fuller argument against such interpretations of Revelation, on quite different grounds, see Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004).

one case, Anabaptist ideals were translated into political reality in the establishment of the “new Jerusalem” in Münster, Germany. Münster became a magnet for Anabaptist sympathizers, who established an eschatological commonwealth with an explicit apocalyptic coloring. Catholics and Lutherans who refused rebaptism were expelled. One of the leaders, Jan Mathijs, became literally a lamb led to the slaughter (cf. Rev 5) as he went out to defeat the surrounding armies of the bishop, only to be slaughtered before the eyes of the horrified Münsterites.

The Apocalypse also influenced the politics of radicals at the time of the English Civil War in the seventeenth century. For example, the social radical Gerard Winstanley, with others called “Diggers,” asserted the common ownership of the land. For Winstanley, the rule of the beast of Rev 13 was not a future, eschatological reality but something evident in the political situation of his own day. An amalgam of the four beasts of Daniel 7, this beast symbolizes for him the professional ministry, royal power, the judiciary, and the buying and selling of the earth.

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In our country, political interpretations of Revelation have been evident from the start. Christopher Columbus wrote in his journal of his vocation to find here on earth the “new heaven and the new earth” of which John spoke in Rev 21:1. In early North American exegesis we find an apocalyptic tradition that focused particularly on the expectation of the coming earthly kingdom of Christ, following the four great empires of the world. The Boston minister Cotton Mather (d. 1638), for example, expected that the new Jerusalem would be centered in New England.⁵

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, grassroots groups influenced by liberation theology have found in John’s refusal to accept the dominant political powers a source of hope and inspiration for resistance. In 1987 in South Africa, Allan Boesak, a Reformed minister and theologian who was imprisoned for his role in the antiapartheid struggle, while recognizing that John wrote of the church’s response to the political situation in Asia Minor in the first century, argued that the book does not receive its complete fulfilment at any one point in history:

And this is why Revelation is so relevant for us today—not so much because we are intrigued by the symbolic language and the mysteries that abound in this book, nor because it is supposed to give us perfect forecasts of the hereafter—but because we see with some astonishment how truly, how authentically, that John, in describing his own time, is describing the times in which we live.⁶

For Boesak, Revelation expresses God’s final judgement on all corrupt political and

⁵Samuel Stein, “Transatlantic Extensions: Apocalyptic in Early New England,” in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984) 277.

⁶Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 29.

religious systems of oppression—including the government of South Africa in his own time. Some of the interpretations that explore the political implications of Revelation for the interpreter's own day—Boesak's, for example—may inspire us. Others serve as cautionary tales.

THE GOD WHO “WAS, AND IS, AND IS TO COME” (REV 1:8)

John's Apocalypse speaks about past, present, and future. It looks back to the faithful witness of Christ and his salvific death (1: 5; ch. 5); it is concerned about the life of Christians in the present—made clear by the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2–3; and it anticipates the future intended by God as well. The first interpreters of the Apocalypse—Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus—resemble the popular prognosticators of our own time in their futurist orientation—though without giving a detailed timetable for the end-time events. They emphasized the coming of a kingdom of earthly bliss, as described in Rev 20. The first interpreter who explicitly rejected this chiliastic interpretation was Origen (*First Principles* ii.11.2). His scattered comments on the Apocalypse emphasized its meaning for the present, especially what it teaches about Christ and about the spiritual life of the believer. Augustine also saw the Apocalypse as a source of insight about the present life of the Christian. His view—that the binding of Satan and the millennial rule of the saints (Rev 20:1–6) refer to events already in progress—was widely influential. Augustine regarded the church even now as the kingdom of Christ, although he sharply contrasted the present reign of the church, in which there are “tares” along with the good “wheat” (Matt 13:24–29), with the reign of the saints in the eschatological kingdom (*City of God* xx.7–9).

The relevance of the Apocalypse for the present life is particularly clear in African American spirituals, which grew out of the bitter experience of slavery. These songs contain images from almost every chapter of Revelation, interpreted in an idiom that brings out their emotive power. The images provide a source of strength in the midst of trouble and become a vehicle for the joyful affirmation of God and his promises. Two parts of the book that especially stirred the African American imagination are the plague sequences of chapters 6–9 and 15–16 and the picture of the new Jerusalem in chapters 21–22. Also frequently mentioned are the suffering Lamb (Rev 5), the white robes worn by the faithful (Rev 7), and the “book of life” (20:12).

The spiritual “In Dat Great Gittin’ up Mornin’,” for example, weaves together images from several parts of the book: the trumpets that unleash plagues (ch. 8), the cosmological signs (6:12–13; 8:12), the angel who stands on both sea and land and who speaks with the voice of seven thunders (10:1–4), the advent of Christ (19:11–16), the unleashing of Satan (20:7), and the last judgment (20:11–15):

Leader: I'm a goin' to tell you 'bout de comin' of de Saviour.

Response: Fare you well, fare you well.

Leader: Dere's a better day a comin' [Response]
 In dat great gittin' up mornin'...
 De Lord spoke to Gabriel...Go look behin' de altar...
 Take down de silvah trumpet...Blow yo' trumpet Gabriel...
 Lord how loud shall I blow it...Blow it right calm an' easy...
 Do not alarm my people...Tell 'em to come to judgment...
 Gabriel blow yo' trumpet...Lord, how loud shall I blow it...
 Loud as seven peals of thunder...Wake de livin' nations
 Place one foot upon de dry lan'...Place de other on de sea...
 Hell shall be uncapp'd an' burnin'...Den de dragon shall be loosen'd...
 Den you'll see po' sinner risin'...den you'll see de worl' on fiah...
 See de moon a bleedin'...See de stars a fallin'...
 See de elements a meltin'...See de forked lightnin'...
 Hear de rumblin' of de thunder...Earth shall reel an' totter...
 See dem marchin' home to heab'n...Den you'll see my Jesus comin'...
 Wid all His holy angels...Take de righteous home to glory...
 Dere dey live wid God forever...
 In dat great gittin' up mornin'.⁷

Of interest here is how images from the plague sequences are associated with the return of Christ and the last judgment. The dramatic force of the images is reinforced by the rhythm and form of the song, in which each line is followed by the response "Fare thee well." The emotional tone builds as leader and chorus answer each other. Like other spirituals, this song expresses a deep longing for justice and also a conviction that the singers, too, are accountable to the divine judge.⁸ Many other spirituals use images from the plague sequences, for example, "My Lord what a mornin' when the stars begin to fall" and "O the rocks and the mountains shall all flee away." In "Dere's no hidin' place" we find an interpretation of Rev 6:15–16: "Oh I went to de rock to hide my face, De rock cried out 'No hidin' place.'"⁹

The images of the judgment day and the new Jerusalem from Rev 20–22 are used in many spirituals to express hope for the establishment of God's justice in the future. But these images also speak to life in the present. "I want to be ready," one song declares, "to walk in Jerusalem just like John, de city was jus' four square...and he declared he'd meet me dere."¹⁰ A spiritual, as Arthur Jones points out, could operate on different levels and serve multiple functions:

When a singer declared, "I got a crown up in-a the Kingdom, ain't-a that good news?" the "Kingdom" could be the internal heaven of the present, earthly freedom symbolized as "Kingdom," or the world of the hereafter. None of these meanings would contradict the idea of active involvement in the realities of the

⁷James Weldon Johnson, and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 2 vols. in one (New York: Da Capo, 1954) 2:40–43.

⁸The accountability of the singers of spirituals to the divine judge—as well as that of those who oppress them—is stressed by Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 101–120.

⁹Johnson and Johnson, *Spirituals*, 1:74.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 2:58–59.

present, whether in the form of the development of a mature religious faith or the involvement in preparations for escape from slavery.¹¹

The recording of a person's deeds in the "book of life"—an image taken from the picture of the last judgement in Rev 20:13–15—also takes place in the present as well as the future:

De Angels in heab'n gwineter write my name...
Yes write my name wida golden pen...
Write my name in de Book of life...
Yes write my name in de drippin' blood.¹²

My Lord's a writin' all de time,
And take me up to wear de crown [Rev 2:10; 3:11]...
Jesus rides in de middle of de' air. [Rev 19:11]
My Lord's a writin' all de time.
Sees all you do. He hears all you say.¹³

WORSHIP GOD! (REV 19:10)

The book of Revelation speaks words of comfort and of protest, as Boesak says, calling Christians to discern and resist the evil present in our world, to join in Christ's struggle against this evil, and to stand firm in hope for the better world of the new Jerusalem. But there is another message that undergirds both comfort and protest and runs through the whole book: the admonition to worship God. The prophet John receives this command near the end of the book, following the visions of the fall of Babylon and of the marriage feast of the Lamb. Overawed by what he has seen, John is about to worship the angel who mediates the revelation when the angel admonishes him: "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!" (19:10). This theme of worship is introduced at the very beginning of the book (see the doxology of 1:5–6), and it is especially clear in Rev 4–5, where John is lifted up into heaven and given a glimpse of a reality deeper than anything he experiences on earth. He sees the glory of God upon the throne and the hosts of heaven falling down before him and before Christ, the Lamb. The scenes of judgment that make up so much of this book (chapters 6 through 20) are framed by this picture of heavenly worship on the one hand and the vision of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21–22) on the other. As the heavenly hosts are even now falling in adoration before God, so will he be worshiped by all in the new Jerusalem. The reward of those who have triumphed over evil is not only the absence of sorrow, trouble, and death (21:4), but also the joy of worshipping God: "But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in [the city] and his servants will worship him; they will see his face; and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev 22:3–4; cf. 21:3 and 7:15–17).

¹¹Jones, *Wade in the Water*, 88.

¹²Johnson and Johnson, *Spirituals*, 2:128–129.

¹³*Ibid.*, 1:123–124.

One thing for which we can thank interpreters of Revelation through the ages is the gift of words and music with which to carry out this command to worship God. Some of these words come from Revelation itself, which contains many hymns of praise (1:5–6; 4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 11, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 16–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:4–7; 19:1–8; 21:3–5). Among the best-known are those set to music by George Frideric Handel in *Messiah* (1742, libretto by Charles Jennens). The second of part of this work ends with the “Hallelujah” chorus, whose words bring together the hymn that celebrates the triumph over Babylon (19:6), the song sung by heavenly voices at the blowing of the seventh trumpet (11:15), and the description of Christ at his second coming (19:11–16):

Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth, Hallelujah! (19:6)

The kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever. (11:15)

King of Kings and Lord of Lords. (19:16) Hallelujah!

For his final chorus, Handel takes his words from the scene of heavenly worship in Rev 5:12–13:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain and hath redeemed us to God by his blood, to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honor, glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.

These same verses appear in the “Hymn of Praise” in the Lutheran service of Holy Communion, preceded and followed by: “This is the feast of victory for our God. Allelulia, Allelulia, Allelulia.”¹⁴

From the scene of heavenly worship in Rev 4–5, one verse that has resonated through the ages is the Sanctus—the threefold “holy, holy, holy” from Rev 4:8. In a practice that goes back at least to the Roman Rite of the late medieval period, the Sanctus is an essential part of the eucharistic liturgy of many churches today.¹⁵ The threefold Sanctus appears first in the prophet Isaiah’s vision of God in Isa 6:3, but the added phrase “heaven and earth are full of your glory” comes from Rev 4:8.

This verse is also echoed in hymns—for example, in “Holy, holy, holy” by the poet Reginald Heber (1783–1826), whose second verse reads:

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
Which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.¹⁶

Here Christians are invited to join in the worship of the heavenly choir as they cast

¹⁴*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 60, 81, 102.

¹⁵E.g., *ibid.*, 69.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, hymn 165.

down their crowns (Rev 4:10), that is, submit all they have to the one who rules heaven and earth. A similar joining of human worshipers with the heavenly hosts is suggested in a spiritual based on Rev 5:

Want to go to heab'n, when I die...To see God's bleedin' Lam'....Den you raise
yo' voice up higher...an' you jine dat heab'nly choir...To see God's bleedin'
Lam'.¹⁷

Many other songs and hymns inspired by John's words continue to be used in worship today. I conclude with one that draws on the description of the new Jerusalem in Rev 21–22. Based on a Latin text by Peter Abelard (d. 1142), it puts us in touch with those who have gone before us: with John the seer of Patmos, with Abelard, and with John Mason Neale, who translated the hymn in the nineteenth century:

O what their joy and their glory must be,
those endless Sabbaths the blessèd ones see;
crown for the valiant, to weary ones rest:
God shall be All, and in all ever blest....

Truly, "Jerusalem" name we that shore,
city of peace that brings joy evermore;
wish and fulfillment are not severed there,
nor do things prayed for come short of the prayer....

Now, in the meantime, with hearts raised on high,
we for that country must yearn and must sigh,
seeking Jerusalem, dear native land,
through our long exile on Babylon's strand.¹⁸

This hymn and others inspired by Revelation remind us that there is a depth and richness to the book that is lost when it is regarded as simply a blueprint for the future. Could it not be that our Christian life would be enriched—in its worship of the Triune God, its sense of what his justice requires, and its expectation of a blessedness we cannot at present imagine—if we meditated carefully on the last book of the Christian canon? ⊕

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¹⁷Johnson and Johnson, *Spirituals*, 2:152–154.

¹⁸An alternative version of the words is found in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, hymn 337.