

# The Book of Revelation

Following the Lamb

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The Revelation (Apocalypse) of John is perhaps the least understood and most misunderstood part of the Bible. Violence, lurid imagery, and inscrutable descriptions of events seem to lie uneasily next to the Gospels and Epistles in the rest of the New Testament. Distracted readers may therefore miss the Apocalypse's profoundly prophetic message—God is redeeming his creation through Christ. Consistent with the witness of the rest of the New Testament, the central motif of salvific redemption is the slaughtered Lamb (Revelation 5:6, 9–10). However, it is the Lamb of 7:17 that speaks most strongly to disciples, for this Lamb is also going to “shepherd” (lead) his followers to the living water that gives eternal life. This paradoxical image, in which God's sheep are guided by a Shepherd-Lamb, is central to a coherent appreciation of John's message.<sup>1</sup> Despite all the bizarre interpretations offered for John's Apocalypse, his book is profoundly pastoral. It is about life and living as a disciple, projected against the backdrop of perhaps the greatest and grandest vision of the entire Bible.

However, to appreciate the “last things,” readers must attend to first things. John's Revelation is not “a coded collection of secrets that will finally become intelligible at the end of time, for from the beginning it has been an open book designed to communicate with Christians on earth” (1:4; 22:10).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Revelation was written almost two thousand years ago in a very different cultural setting, and some of its imagery is quite disturbing. Thus, we must attend to some significant literary features and the historical context before we move into its message.

## Gender and Violence

Since many readers who might enjoy John's Revelation are understandably concerned about its violence, this will be the first topic. Readers may find these visions unsettling because of the raw carnage (e.g., 9:16–18; 19:17–18) or the targeting of women (2:20–23; 17:16), and other visions are alarming because God is not typically associated with calls for vengeance in the minds of most biblical readers (6:9–11), nor are the heavenly hosts often portrayed as celebrating the destruction of others (19:1–3).<sup>3</sup> There is no easy and complete response that settles these issues for all readers, and indeed, to engage the argument in any detail would consume this entire chapter. Four points will be made here, but interested readers should pursue this topic in the secondary literature.<sup>4</sup>

First, readers who question the propriety of imagery such as the martyrs' call for vengeance in 6:9–11 might hesitate to criticize unless they have experienced similarly crushing injustice. It is true that the visions of John's Revelation have been used to support ill-advised notions of "redemptive violence," but these arise from failure to appreciate that the Lamb conquered by his faithful witness, not through violence.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the victims of oppression overcome through their own faithful witness, rather than adopting the violence of their oppressors.<sup>6</sup> Their desire for vengeance is addressed to God and left to his justice.

Second, the depictions of combat slaughter are as symbolic as much of the rest of John's imagery. For example, in 19:11–21 John narrates the premillennial destruction of evil. Initially, the heavens are opened to allow a rider on a white horse and his followers to descend. The rider is Christ, and he is said to be wearing a robe dipped in blood *before* the combat begins, suggesting that the blood is his own. He has many royal diadems, rather than a discrete number, as a challenge to the limited power of the dragon and the beast. Where one might expect to find a battle sword, he has a title, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (19:16). This title expresses the superiority of his relationship with the rulers of the nations of the earth but is never part of his rapport with the saints. Although the rider has companions on white horses, their unspotted white clothing indicates that their battles have been fought and won—they have overcome and washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. Only the rider will fight in this engagement; that is, "*he* doth judge and make war," then "*he* shall rule them with a rod of iron," and "*he* treadeth the wine press" (19:11, 15; emphasis added) of God's wrath. However, since his only weapon is a symbol, that is, a sword that comes from his mouth, the battle is one of words (19:15).<sup>7</sup> In effect, "the God who spoke the world into existence will, through the Word of God, speak evil into nonexistence."<sup>8</sup> The description of the carnage in 19:17–18, 21, then, symbolizes the completeness of the Lamb's victory, not how it is accomplished.<sup>9</sup> There are no real weapons, there is no real combat, and the saints never engage evil with violence.<sup>10</sup>

Third, God is very slow to execute justice on those who oppress the saints, but when he does so it has a poetic quality. The justice meted to the violent in Revelation is that they become victims of their own behaviors. For example, the whore is destroyed by the violence she used against others (17:16), teaching readers that "the city that thrives on the violence its rulers use against others will finally fall victim to these same destructive practices."<sup>11</sup> Yet,

even this divine response to injustice is sometimes moderated. In the final plague septet, seven angels carrying vials containing the wrath of God leave heaven for the earth (15:5–8). One of the more horrific images follows from the mission of the third angel, whose vial turns potable water sources to blood (16:4–7). When his task is complete, he opines that God has given the wicked what they deserve: those who *killed* the saints have been *given blood to drink*. The souls of the martyrs, who asked for God’s vengeance in 6:10, agree with the angel of the waters that this imbalance between crime and punishment is just and true (16:7). God’s justice is more concerned with overcoming evil rather than destroying people. Even when Babylon finally falls, and with her all the cities of the nations, the suffering inhabitants still live, with time to repent (16:21).<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the most significant issue with the violence in John’s Revelation is that it appears as if God and Christ have adopted the tactics of the beast rather than the qualities traditionally attributed to them. This concern is not addressed directly but is worked out in the narrative. The threatening scenes of the seals and the trumpets are interrupted to show the source and scale of divine mercy in the sealing of the 144,000, the redemption of multitudes seen before the throne of God and the Lamb, the safety of those who are inside the temple when John measures it, and the diminution of expected violence from the final earthquake (6:16–17; 7:1–17; 9:20–21; 10:1–11:12). Only when many have opted to worship God on the basis of the martyrdom and resurrection of the two witnesses does the seventh trumpet announce the end (11:13). Likewise, the tree of life over the river of life in the New Jerusalem is said to have leaves for the “healing of the nations” (22:2), which would not be needed if God had indeed executed justice as wholesale slaughter. Although God’s warnings must be taken seriously, they should not be isolated from the ways in which their execution is delayed and moderated to facilitate needed lifestyle changes before the end comes.<sup>13</sup>

## Genre

Revelation’s genre is typically considered hybrid; that is, it has features of an epistle, a prophecy, and an apocalypse. The entire book, less the opening verses, is framed as a letter, to be carried by messengers from John to readers in the seven named churches (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea). John identifies his own work as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19), the only text to be explicitly identified with this genre in the Christian canon. He establishes continuity with Israel’s prophets by repeatedly alluding to them without quoting any known version. However, he also creates his own prophetic vision by asserting that the promises made to ancient Israel will come to fruition through Christ’s defeat of evil. John’s auditors participate in this victory by doing as Jesus did, that is, bearing a faithful witness of God and Jesus in their own lives.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, John’s narrative is an apocalypse. The classification of certain texts as apocalyptic literature was developed by Friedrich Lücke in his 1832 introduction to the Revelation of John. The texts he identified were Daniel, 4 Ezra, 1 Enoch, and the Sibylline Oracles, in addition to Revelation.<sup>15</sup> Although Revelation and 2 and 3 Baruch employ the term *apocalypse*,

the generic description of an apocalypse is modern: “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>16</sup>

Texts regarded as apocalypses will have most, but not all, of the features described in the above definition. The key point is that an apocalypse reveals the *transcendent reality* of a future salvation or a supernatural world in some detail. By so doing, readers are alerted to the fact that there is more to life than the present, usually unpleasant circumstances, so to prosper they will need to adopt a longer, more complete perspective. The generic definition is often amended by the addition of a statement regarding the purpose of an apocalypse, typically to “interpret the present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and *to influence both the understanding and behavior of the audience by means of divine authority*.”<sup>17</sup> This modification is significant because it indicates that the insights of an apocalypse were written to be understood *and applied* by their audiences. Reading Revelation is not about decoding the future but about recoding oneself in the present to align more closely with God.

## Symbolism

Symbolism is typical of apocalyptic literature, but John’s symbolism is both pervasive and remarkable. The literary indications of a nonliteral interpretation include a linking of two totally different ideas, such as the identification of the Lamb as a shepherd (7:17), the use of words that formally indicate a nonliteral reading such as “mystery” (1:20) or “here is wisdom” (13:18), the impossibility of a literal interpretation such as “out of his mouth went a sharp, twoedged sword” (1:16), and most importantly the repeated use of the same expression in figurative contexts elsewhere in Revelation. In some cases, such as the identification of the Lamb (5:6) or the man-child who is caught up to heaven (12:5), symbols operate at the level of characterization, a point to which I will return in the following section. In others, such as the description of the New Jerusalem as a great, radiant cube coming down from heaven (21:10–16), what is created is a mental picture with dimensions that defy logical harmonization but are nonetheless meaningful.<sup>18</sup>

What is the purpose of this use of symbolic language? First, it was not meant to hide John’s meaning from the Roman authorities, for John’s readers would have easily connected a city personified as a woman resting on seven hills with Rome (17:9, 18).<sup>19</sup> Second, these symbols are evocative or tensive; that is, they can usually be identified with something in John’s first-century world but that does not exhaust their meaning. Thus, the beast from the sea may be understood as the Roman cult of John’s day that bent the indigenous religions of Asia Minor to its will, but its qualities are those of every oppressive organization throughout history.<sup>20</sup> In addition, this sort of language is particularly suited for describing ideas for which propositional language fails, such as the ultimate beginning or end of creation. Just as we can discern the *meaning* of our creation from Genesis without prejudice to the sciences

or history, so too can John's nonpropositional communication convey the *meaning and goal* of existence without necessarily making any claim to scientific or historical verisimilitude. Just exactly *what* will happen remains to be seen, but the *why* and *how* are revealed and become the basis for concrete action in the present.<sup>21</sup>

One last important aspect of Revelation's symbolism is the use of numbers. Even casual readers are familiar with the way Revelation is structured by the number seven: there are seven letters, seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven vials. However, many other instances of numerical symbolism are less obvious. Seven is associated with completeness, and there are seven beatitudes that together describe the proper response to John's narrative.<sup>22</sup> Since the world is envisioned with four corners, one way to indicate that Rome's mercantile interests exploited the entire world would be to name twenty-eight (4 x 7) items that are bought and sold (18:12–13). The title "Lord God Almighty" occurs seven times, as does "Christ," while "Lamb" appears twenty-eight times, but no such pattern exists for John's evil characters: the dragon, beast, and false prophet. Readers who wish to discover more of the intricacies of John's use of numerical symbolism have only to remember to count when they notice repetition.<sup>23</sup>

## Narrative

Like the Gospels and Acts, John's Revelation is a narrative from 1:9–22:20, which means that readers must work with plot, setting, point of view, and so forth. However, for the present purpose, characterization and repetition are the most significant aspects of narrative. Like the apocalyptic chapters of Daniel, Revelation is written as a first-person narrative in which John is present in his own story as the narrator. Although John can see and hear beyond what is normal for a human, he is not omniscient and so receives instructions and explanations from characters such as the elders, a heavenly voice, or angels (5:4–5; 10:4; 17:7). John's duties as a narrator consist mostly of recording what he sees and hears regarding other characters and the events in which they are engaged.<sup>24</sup>

John uses repetition for characterization in a variety of ways, but three are significant for this chapter because we wish to see how John influences his readers to worship God and maintain their testimony of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> First, he uses repetition to emphasize some aspect of a character. For example, the whore is rarely mentioned without her wine, which reinforces distaste (16:19; 17:4; 18:6). Second, repetition creates webs of association in which characters are linked by their similarities.<sup>26</sup> For example, the two largest vertical webs are associated with the holiness of God and the deceptive nature of the dragon, both of whom sit at the pinnacle of their respective allegiances. God is characterized by repetition of *holy* in the *Trisagion*, sung by the four beasts: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty / which was, and is, and is to come" (4:8). Although God's superior holiness is indicated by triple repetition, a feature of Semitic languages, Christ (3:7), the angels (14:10), the New Jerusalem (11:2; 21:2, 10), and the Saints ("holy ones") all share this same quality.<sup>27</sup> The dragon, on the other hand, is introduced as the deceiver of "the whole world" (12:9), and his comrades, the beast and the

false prophet, as well as Babylon, are likewise deceptive (13:14; 19:20; 18:23). Naturally, the dragon's followers are those who are deceived (13:14; 20:8). John motivates lifestyle changes in his auditors because they are moved to question their own perceptions and alignments against the allegiances established by this repetition.

Finally, characters with contrasting allegiance are brought into conversation with each other through a combination of parallel and contrasting repetition. While the Lamb shares the power, authority, and throne of God (12:10), the beast shares that of the dragon (13:2). However, the Lamb's dignity and position are derived from God, the one "which was, and is, and is to come" (4:8), while the beast's situation will degenerate as the dragon's reach is curtailed by God (16:10). In this way John reveals the essential deception of the dragon's evil: he has nothing to offer that compares with God's gracious plans, he knows that his time is short, and yet he persists in deceiving humans (12:10–12). When Revelation's characters are "read" like this, rather than decrypted by asserting a singular association with persons or events in history, John's message becomes readily pertinent in multiple historical and cultural contexts.<sup>28</sup> The saints overcome the world when they are faithful witnesses of God's essential holiness, for which worship is rightfully due, while the dragon's fundamentally deceptive nature calls for rejection.

## Historical Context

At the most basic level, knowing the historical context of an ancient narrative helps readers by suggesting the historical period and general cultural parameters that informed the author(s) and earliest audiences. This is essential to noticing, let alone interpreting, nearly every feature of ancient literature. The most significant elements of historical context are the author, the audience, and the date. Since John's Revelation does not appear to be pseudepigraphal or otherwise deliberately anachronized, we must closely attend to the internal evidence, that is, what the text itself says about these details. The audience is the seven churches identified in Revelation: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11), but John's use of the number seven may also be symbolic, indicating he had a wider audience in mind. In any case, most of the churches of Asia Minor at the end of the first century would have had some mix of Jewish and gentile Christians. The date at which the text reached its current form was probably late in the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96). The author identifies himself as John, locates himself within his audience as a "brother," affirms his testimony of Jesus and ascribes his present difficulties to it, and gives his location as the island of Patmos, off the coast of modern Turkey (1:9). Further details regarding his identity, if they were not already known, would have been provided to his audiences by the persons who carried his letter. He shows detailed awareness of the situation in the seven churches, suggesting that his choice of *brother* is accurate, at least as far as it goes. Although he never calls himself a prophet, he is commissioned at least twice to so serve (1:9–20; 10:1–11). Intriguingly, John refers to "prophets" several times as a group, alongside "saints" and "apostles" (16:6; 18:20). In addition, John is very familiar with the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament),

and he rendered his revelation as an apocalypse in ways characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic, for which there are no known examples outside Palestine. He seems to know details of Jerusalem before AD 70 and writes as if Greek were his second language.<sup>29</sup>

## Reading John's Revelation

With this background in mind, it is now appropriate to consider certain passages in some detail, as a pattern for reading the entire text. The initial vision of Christ in 1:9–20 and the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2–3) are foundational, so we will start with Christ among the churches. Then, since the saints must discern between true and false worship, it will help to look more closely at John's critique of Babylon. Third, we will ask what John thinks the saints must do to overcome and to enter the New Jerusalem, and finally we will look at the new creation and its glory in the New Jerusalem.

### *Christ among the churches*

Although John has been introduced earlier, a second round of identification and association begins in 1:9. This time he emphasizes his status as a member of the churches to which he writes, thus creating an emotional bond between himself and those who will listen to his letter. The voice that commands John to write to the seven churches is that of Christ; the description that follows indicates Christ's relationship with the churches in the era between his resurrection and second coming.

The characterization of Christ in this vision reveals both his identity and role. His clothing discloses his status: a long robe and chest-high sash ("girt about the paps;" 1:13) indicate high social standing, as physical laborers wore short robes and a belt to bind up the robe.<sup>30</sup> Although John identifies the figure he sees as "one like unto the Son of man" (1:13), an allusion to Daniel 7:13, the white hair he describes is modeled after the image of God as the "Ancient of days" in Daniel 7:9. This distinctive conflation of the one like the Son of man and the Ancient of days from the same Danielic vision suggests that Christ is also to be thought of as divine.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the depiction of his eyes as flames of fire and feet as polished metal reminds readers of the powerful figure in Daniel 10:5–6. The impression is strengthened by his speech, in which Christ claims for himself the divine description in Isaiah 44:6 that "I am the first, and I am the last" but distinguishes himself from God because he overcame death precisely by dying: "I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore . . . and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:17–18). The churches may likewise expect to transcend death, should their obligation as witnesses require it, because Christ has the keys of death and hell (1:18).<sup>32</sup>

Beyond his appearance, Christ is pictured as standing among the oil-burning lamps that represent the seven churches. This recalls the seven-branched lampstands standing before God in the Jerusalem temple and establishes a parallel.<sup>33</sup> The churches are now a worshiping community like that of ancient Israel: they worship Christ, and Christ is their protector and judge. He holds the angels that govern these churches in his right hand, which

connotes control, favor, and security. Judgment is symbolized by the sword that comes from his mouth, and he speaks both praise and warning to the churches (Revelation 2–3). Thus, when the churches choose their relationship with Christ, they choose their future.<sup>34</sup>

The letters to the seven churches in chapters 2–3 have been sources of fruitful insight for almost two thousand years. Although on the surface they appear to be a distinctive section in John's Revelation, they are tightly bound to the larger narrative through repetition. Christ, the author of the letters, typically authenticates his judgment by identifying himself with one or more features of the initial vision of Christ among the seven lampstands (e.g., 1:13; 2:1). He likewise authenticates his promises of salvation by indicating that those who overcome will participate in the life of the New Jerusalem in one way or another (e.g., 2:7; 22:2). Between these two features, he delivers summary judgment. Three churches are both commended and warned: Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira are all struggling with assimilation, albeit in different ways.<sup>35</sup> Two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, receive only praise, and it is these two churches that are experiencing persecution. Sardis and Laodicea, who are described as complacent, that is, without significant challenges, receive only condemnation. Although one can read each letter separately, they are also fruitfully read in the groups indicated, as we will now do.

The immediate problem in Ephesus, to whom the first letter was addressed, was discernment of false leaders and their similarly flawed teachings (2:2–3). The Ephesians seem to have been successful in rejecting false leaders, but in the process they have lost their “first love” (2:4). It is easy to understand how such discussions could degenerate into conflict, precisely because people cared deeply about the moral and theological implications of their choices.<sup>36</sup> Thyatira, likewise struggling with assimilation, presents the opposite picture (2:18–29). Its members are commended for their love but warned about their toleration of Jezebel, a woman who called herself a prophet (2:20). This is likewise easy to imagine, as people may be willing to do the right thing themselves but unwilling to engage in confrontation to motivate others (2:24–25).<sup>37</sup> Finally, the situation in Pergamum was somewhat different, for while Ephesus and Thyatira struggled with assimilation of unacceptable Christian practices, Pergamum was contending with assimilation to pagan behaviors (2:12–17). The pressure to participate in community social events that involved eating meat sacrificed to idols must have been immense for those seeking favorable business opportunities, marriages, and other civic contracts. Some resisted, thereby accepting the limitations, while others did not.<sup>38</sup> Read together, all three communities are fragmented by pressures to assimilate, although in different ways. The lesson is that disciples must maintain their loving relationships even while they learn the limits of their association with pagans and discriminate among Christian leaders.

The situation in the remaining four churches revolves around the presence or absence of a threat, and in each case the justice rendered is poetic. Smyrna and Philadelphia are both threatened, although not identically (2:10; 3:8–9). To the church in Smyrna, which faces death, Christ promises life (2:10), while to the church in Philadelphia, which faces loss of public esteem through slander, he grants his own love (3:9). On the other hand, Sardis and



Laodicea face no threat and seem to be thriving, but appearances are deceiving. Sardis shows a lively front but is, in fact, dead (3:1), while Laodicea claims to be rich and secure but is poor, blind, and naked (3:17). If Sardis does not wake up, she will find herself awakened by the unexpected return of Christ (3:3), while Laodicea must move away from tepid religion to buy what is needed from Christ (3:18). Christ's judgment, not that of society, is significant.<sup>39</sup>

### *Critique of Babylon*

The quality that links Babylon to the other evil entities of Revelation is their deceptive intentions, so we begin with the truth: at the center of heaven is God's throne, and God is to be worshipped because of who he is (4:8) and what he has done as creator (4:11). In the midst of the throne, so likewise at the center of heaven, is the slain Lamb, and he is to be worshipped because he redeemed humanity (5:9–10). The dragon seems to have sought to frustrate God through destruction of the man-child (12:4), but his efforts were defeated by God. The dragon then attacked heaven itself, starting a war that will last until the Second Coming, but was foiled in his initial assault by an angelic army (12:7–8). The dragon was also expelled from heaven by means of the faithful witness of the saints: the dragon had been their accuser, but because the saints kept the testimony of Jesus, their robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb (22:14), leaving no need for an accuser in heaven (12:10–11).<sup>40</sup> Limited to the earth, the dragon's pursuit of the woman was similarly thwarted as the earth opened her mouth and swallowed the water he sent after the woman (12:15–16). Defeated three times, expelled from heaven, and stripped of his celestial army, the dragon stands angry and alone on the seashore (13:1). John's readers now know the truth: God and the Lamb are to be worshipped, and the dragon is not. Those who think that the dragon runs riotous because he is invincible will be tempted to give up, but those who realize that he has only limited power and time will resist.<sup>41</sup>

How does the dragon deceive? The dragon responds to his defeats by calling up two assistants, one from the sea, which John's audiences may have understood as Rome or the Roman cult, and one from the land, representing the local cults that supported Roman religiosity in their false worship (13:1, 11). John spends the whole of chapter 13 on the characterization of these two evil figures because by so doing he reveals the hidden nature of evil in all ages: it imitates God's goodness but ultimately points those who follow it toward death.<sup>42</sup> The most salient characteristics of the first beast is that, like Christ, it has suffered a mortal wound (13:3). However, Christ's death brought life, while the beast's life brings death (13:7–10). The second beast is said to have two horns like a lamb, but he is unlike the Lamb in that he turns those who listen to him away from God (13:13) and toward worship of the first beast in ways that permeate day-to-day existence (13:16–17). Although humans might find the beasts powerful and compelling, John's audiences know that the depredations of the two are limited (13:5). They must endure the persecution of the beasts, but their endurance will not be in vain if they remain faithful witnesses of the rightful worship of God and the Lamb (13:10).<sup>43</sup>

The last great evil figure in Revelation is both revealed and destroyed in chapter 17. One of the angels invites John to look more closely at a new female figure, identified by the angel as “the great whore” (17:1). John’s earliest readers would have understood this character as a symbol for Rome (17:18), but her qualities are those of every oppressive power. From a distance, she looks like a fine lady, but her characterization includes elements of both the courtesan (fancy clothing and jewelry) and the tavern prostitute (multiple partners). Her corruption becomes even more clear when one approaches closely: she is drunk rather than sober, and her intoxicant is made of vile things.<sup>44</sup> Her description is antithetical to that of the cosmic woman (12:1) and the bride of the Lamb (21:9–11), for the whore’s glory is a weak imitation of the woman clothed in the sun (12:1), and her association with the kings of the earth make her unfit for marriage (17:2). In addition, her position is unstable. She appears powerful, riding a beast with seven heads and ten horns, but this too is an illusion, and perhaps even satire, for the beast she rides is a grotesque parody of the horses of the imperial stable. This sort of imagery acts to convince John’s audience that what appears glamorous and impressive is sordid and ridiculous.<sup>45</sup> After the arrogance of the ten kings leads to their defeat, they will react by destroying the whore (17:12–14, 16). Although she killed the saints and enslaved the whole earth, her victims do not rise and destroy her. Instead, her end comes through her closest associates because evil is its own worst enemy.<sup>46</sup>

While chapter 17 describes the whore and narrates her death, chapter 18 reveals the identity and nature of the evil that consorted with her by reporting on her funeral. Babylon’s death is announced by a third mighty angel whose brightness highlights the twilight of Babylon (18:1). Since dirges were integral to funerals, a celestial voice reports three, sung by those who had once profited from Rome’s exploitation.<sup>47</sup> The kings mourn Babylon, but they stand sufficiently far away to avoid giving aid or being unduly discomfited (18:9–10). The merchants mourn the loss of cargo, but one sees that their mercantile instincts are like those of the whore.<sup>48</sup> They have devalued human life by reducing it to merchandise that works the fields, fills the brothels, entertains in the arena, and maintains an illusion of a prosperous and virtuous community (18:12–13).<sup>49</sup> The last to speak are the sailors, and they are very candid in their self-interest (18:17–19). The final voice is again that of an angel, who makes three accusations: Babylon encouraged her merchants to exploit the earth for their own selfish purposes, she was deceptive in her engagements, and she *slaughtered* the prophets and saints. The condemnation of Babylon follows from her opposition to God and his ways.

Although John’s earliest audiences would have heard a critique of Rome in these chapters, that identification does not exhaust this text for modern readers. The evil described here is typically labeled “empire” in honor of Rome’s place in this narrative, but it neither began nor ended there. It is any nation, organization, or community that values wealth, ease, military power, cultural sophistication, and so forth over the Creator and his creation. Empire dominates, and it does so by enticing the elites with promises of more power. The common folk, even those who have been conquered, are likewise drawn to empire but by promises of physical and financial security (13:4; 16–17). Empire looks good from a distance, which fuels its expansion (18:7–9). However, the reality is that empire is exploitative,

for it *must* expand to feed the appetite of elites for wealth and novelty (18:11–14), and in the end it sets itself against God by destroying what he created (11:18).<sup>50</sup> The real outrage is its treatment of people, however, for it buys and sells humans as chattel and regards human life as a commercial commodity (18:13), while the Lamb redeemed humans, gave them dignity through a kingdom and priesthood, and set them on the path for a fullness of life in the New Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup> In short, empire is condemned for idolatry and injustice, the two sins most often charged to humanity in the Bible.<sup>52</sup> And since the saints are told to “come out” (18:4), readers are not free to assume that they do not share in the exploitative sins of empire.

### *Who is able to stand?*

Given the critique of empire just offered, readers are justified in wondering who makes it to the New Jerusalem and how they do so. The short answer is that God has taken it upon himself to make it so; that is, salvation is an act of grace.<sup>53</sup> However, a longer response is worth considering, for the revelation of God’s mercy and grace is largely carried in sections of the text that scholars call the “interludes” (embedded narratives) because they halt the forward progression of God’s judgments. The most significant, in 7:1–17, indicates that God has offered a means of redemption for those who will seize it, and the rest of the interludes likewise depict divine grace still working within creation.<sup>54</sup>

The first interlude is part of the seal septet (6:1–8:4). One of the principal rhetorical functions of the first four seals and the first four trumpets is to shatter any illusions about being able to escape judgment.<sup>55</sup> The first four seals release war, violence, famine, pestilence, and death on humans (6:1–8). The first four trumpets strike the earth, its vegetation, the ocean, sources of fresh water, and the sky, darkening the sun, moon, and stars (8:7–12). In short, there is no place or nation to which one can flee for safety. The issue is put succinctly with the opening of the sixth seal (6:15–17): “And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”

Readers will notice that there are seven social classes listed, from kings to slaves, indicating that all of humanity poses this question. One response has already been given, for with the opening of the fifth seal the voices of the martyrs speak from under the altar in the heavenly temple, asking God for judgment. Nothing remains for them to do, and thus they are told simply to wait (6:9–11).<sup>56</sup> However, for those still on the earth, the question is so pertinent that the forward progress of John’s vision is interrupted for an entire chapter (7:1–17).

As chapter 7 opens, four angels are prepared to release their destructive winds on the earth, the sea, and the trees. A fifth angel appears, carrying the seal of God, probably thought of as a signet ring, and warns the four angels to hold off until they have marked the servants of God on their foreheads with the seal (7:3). Those who can claim the dignity of this relationship with God will not face his displeasure. The text does not say what form the mark

took, but it does indicate that those who serve God now belong to him, and they enjoy protection from the demonic armies of the trumpet cycle (9:4) but not from the depredations of the beast (13:7–10). John hears that 144,000 from the tribes of Israel have been so sealed (7:4), invoking the promises of Israel’s prophets, but he sees an innumerable multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language (7:9), indicating the universal fulfillment of these divine promises. According to an elder whose role is to explain the scene to John, the innumerable multitude who stand before the throne of God do so because they have “washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:13–14), a repentance motif with implications for the title “servant of God.” Finally, the interlude ends with a cascading chain of promises that likewise extend the assurances first made to Israel to the rest of humanity.<sup>57</sup>

### *The bride, the wife of the Lamb*

The culmination of God’s promises is presented by John in 21:1–22:5 as several significant eschatological passages from Israel’s prophets are reprised, as are the promises to those who overcome in Revelation 2–3. This section is divided into three parts, each of which penetrates more deeply into the mystery of the final state of humans. The first part, 21:1–8, is focused on the broad details of the new creation. In 21:9–21, John accompanies an angel on a tour of the New Jerusalem, a symbolic city that represents both the redeemed and their society. Finally, John concludes with a description of the significant elements of the interior of the city and the final state of those humans who have overcome (22:1–5).<sup>58</sup> In all three sections, the emphasis has shifted from destruction to describing the profound renewal of the earth and those who inhabit it. This new earth, rather than traditional portrayals of heaven, becomes the final dwelling place of God, the Lamb, and humans.<sup>59</sup>

The description of the new heaven and earth in 21:1–8 echoes a similar declaration in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 and is announced in a chiasm centered on the New Jerusalem:

*new* heaven and *new* earth (verse 1a)  
     the first heaven, earth and sea have *passed away* (verse 1b)  
         the sea *exists no longer* (verse 1b)  
             the holy city descends (verse 2)  
                 God dwells with humans (verses 3–4a)  
                     death *exists no longer* (verse 4b)  
                         former things have *passed away* (verse 4b)  
                             God creates everything *new* (verse 5a)<sup>60</sup>

Two points are of immediate interest. First, the Greek word behind “new” is *καινός*, which has a sense of qualitative, rather than temporal, newness. This is a new reality accomplished by God’s creative activity after the destruction of the old order.<sup>61</sup> Second, the obliteration of the sea follows from the roles of this body of water in the earlier chapters of John’s vision. Foremost among them are the sea as the place from which the dragon sum-

moned his evil helpers (13:1), the sea as the place of the dead (20:13), and the sea as the principal location of Babylon's evil mercantile activities (18:10–19). Thus, there will be no threat from Satan, no more death, and no further commercial exploitation.<sup>62</sup>

Verses 5–8 are often considered the theological climax of John's vision, as God speaks seven times from the throne, first to describe himself and his role, then to clarify the new situation in which humans find themselves. His announcement that he is making "*all things new*" (21:5; emphasis added) extends Isaiah's announcement that God was doing "*a new thing*" (Isaiah 43:19; emphasis added). The divine assurance that "it is done" (Revelation 21:6) indicates that God's plans end not with destruction but with creation, and God's self-identification as the "Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (21:6) means that the culmination of history is a person rather than an event. The remainder of this section describes the two eschatological alternatives for humans. They either enjoy a life in familial relationship with God and inherit his promises, an intimacy not offered before the new creation, or they inherit (have a share in) punishment (21:6–8). It is no accident that the vice list in 22:8 leads off with cowardice and faithlessness because those two traits would have led to compromise with evil. Beyond that, the abominable share the qualities of Babylon (17:4): murders take lives including those of the martyrs, whoremongers are unfaithful to their commitments, sorcerers reflect the activities of the beast (13:13–14), idolaters fail to worship correctly, and liars facilitate the deceptive behaviors of the dragon and his associates (12:9).<sup>63</sup> This depiction of the stark choice between life with God and the second death is another opportunity for John's listeners to examine their allegiance and behavior.

In the second section of John's description of the new creation, readers move in for a detailed view of the New Jerusalem. Just as John received an angelic invitation to see and understand the collapse of Babylon (17:1), so now he similarly views the descent from heaven of its antithesis, the New Jerusalem (21:9), once again indicating that readers are faced with a choice. And just as John measured the earthly temple in 11:1–2 with a reed, so now an angel measures the heavenly city with a golden reed (21:15) as John describes what he sees.<sup>64</sup> The initial and overwhelming impression is that the city reflects the beauty of God with its references to radiance and to gems, particularly jasper (4:3; 21:11, 18–19). The organization of the city alludes to, and extends, Ezekiel's description of the temple complex in Ezekiel 40–48. The twelve gates of the temple in Ezekiel 48:30–35 become the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem, although the focus in John's vision is on the ease of access to the city. The city is laid out "foursquare," just as was the temple in Ezekiel 42:15–20, although rather than a square, it is a cube and thus one degree of perfection greater than what was envisioned by Ezekiel, and its overall dimensions are significantly greater.<sup>65</sup> The conditions of life in the city are described by a series of alternating positive and negative statements. The city has no temple, no sun, no moon, no closed gates, and nothing defiled, abominable, or deceptive. From this, it follows that it has the presence and glory of God and the Lamb, no threats to peace or security, and citizens who are enrolled in the Lamb's book of life (Isaiah 60:3, 5, 11, 19). The implications of this for those so favored is elaborated upon in the final section.

John's last vision is narrowly focused on what appears to be the center section of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:1–5). No voices will speak because the richness of the imagery carries all that needs to be said. As has been the case throughout this section, John's vision redevelops images from the Old Testament. The river of life and the tree of life in the center of the tableau create the sense of a renewed Eden, although this time surrounded by a city in a joyful fusion of urban and rural imagery. The river, the first unpolluted stream in Revelation, flows from the throne of God and the Lamb, envisioned as a *bisellium* or dual throne, in an allusion to the water that flows from the temple in Ezekiel 47:1–12. The tree of life is probably growing over the top of the stream, in imitation of the sacred oasis in Greco-Roman literature. Its fecundity indicates that the citizens of the New Jerusalem will lack for nothing, and the notice that the leaves are for the healing of the nations stands in contrast to Babylon, which looted the nations for its own pleasure.<sup>66</sup>

Just as the physical description of the city centers on God and the Lamb, so too does the life of the humans who live there. All are marked as the servants of God by having his name on each of their foreheads, rather than just those males descended from Aaron. Although fully seeing God's face formerly brought death (Exodus 33:2), such intimacy is now simply part of life. Finally, the saints are said to "reign forever and ever," just as do God and the Lamb (Revelation 22:5; 11:15). No information is given regarding whom they rule over, but there is no question that the end of John's vision is not the end of all things, but rather a new beginning.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

John's Revelation is first and foremost a source of encouragement and insight. It is, to be sure, packaged in a combination of genres that are unfamiliar to many modern readers, expressed in symbolism that is best read with some background in first-century Christianity, and marked with violence that seems over-the-top to modern sensibilities. However, those who get past these surface features are confronted with the most profound prophetic call for authentic worship and pervasive reflection and repentance in the entire Bible as Babylon is thoroughly critiqued. John goes beyond the prophetic, however, to affirm that through the Lamb's selfless offering, God's creation will transcend death and hell, becoming a new creation in which evil is no longer present. To participate in this new creation, those who follow the Shepherd-Lamb can neither withdraw from this world, for they must be witnesses of the Lamb, nor assimilate to it, for they must come out (and stay out) of Babylon. Unfortunately, humans cannot extricate themselves from Babylon, which may be why the invitation to wash one's garments in the blood of the Lamb is among the last exhortations in the book (22:14). The sacrificial death of the Lamb, then, and the prophetic witness of those who follow him are the twin pillars of God's plan for the redemption of creation. In this sense, Revelation is indeed a blueprint of the future.



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## Further Reading

- Aune, David E. *Revelation 1–5*. Word Biblical Commentary 52A. Dallas: Word, 1997.
- . *Revelation 6–16*. Word Biblical Commentary 52B. Nashville: Nelson, 1998.
- . *Revelation 17–22*. Word Biblical Commentary 52C. Nashville: Nelson, 1998.
- Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New York: Cambridge, 1993.
- Carey, Greg. *Apocalyptic Literature in the New Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2016.
- Koester, Craig R. *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries. New Haven: Yale, 2014.
- Levine, Amy-Jill, ed., with Maria Mayo Robbins. *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*. New York: T&T Clark, 2009.
- Resseguie, James L. *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

## Notes

1. The Greek phrase translated “lead them” in 7:17 is *poimanei autous*, literally “shepherd them.” Notice of this paradoxical Shepherd-Lamb imagery is nearly ubiquitous in commentaries, and pasturing the divine flock is also predicated of God in Isaiah 49 and Psalm 23, but interested readers can begin with G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 442.
2. Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 40.
3. In fact, the phrase “how long” as a demand for vengeance is found at least fifty times in scripture, most often in the Psalms and in Jeremiah. See Wes Howard and Anthony Gwynther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 142.
4. Some scholars have argued that the depiction of the violent end of the whore (17:16), as well as John’s verbal assault on Jezebel (2:20–23), has hurt women. For an introduction to the argument, see Tina Pippin, “Eros and the End: Reading for Gender in the Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 59 (1992): 193–210. See the larger commentary by Koester for more citations.
5. Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 155–58.
6. Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 150–51.
7. Koester, *End of All Things*, 175–79.
8. Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 153.
9. Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 152.
10. Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 155. See also 1 Nephi 14, in which the saints are “armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory” rather than traditional weapons, while the nations of earth are beset with “wars and rumors of wars” (14:14–15).
11. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 693–94.
12. Koester, *End of All Things*, 149–50.
13. Koester, *Revelation*, 307–8. More reflection on gendered and sexualized violence in Revelation may be found on pages 693–95.
14. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 144.

15. Frederick J. Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 5.
16. John J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 5.
17. Adele Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 7; emphasis added.
18. Beale, *Revelation*, 57.
19. Koester, *End of All Things*, 158, 159–60.
20. M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 55–56.
21. Boring, *Revelation*, 52. For example, in both Genesis and Revelation we learn our place in the rest of God's creation.
22. James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 28–32. This source provides a relatively comprehensive introduction to numerical symbolism in Revelation. The significance of the seven beatitudes of Revelation is summarized in Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 39.
23. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 1993), 29–37.
24. James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 121.
25. Janice Capel Anderson, *Matthew's Narrative Web: Over and Over and Over Again* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1994), 44.
26. James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse*, vol. 32, *Biblical Interpretation Series*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Rolf Rendtorff (Boston: Brill, 1998), 124, 128, 142.
27. Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 78.
28. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*, 103–4.
29. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), xlix–l.
30. Koester, *Revelation*, 245.
31. Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993), 26–27.
32. Koester, *Revelation*, 254.
33. Koester, *Revelation*, 255.
34. Koester, *End of All Things*, 54.
35. Koester, *End of All Things*, 57, 63, 66.
36. Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 32.
37. Koester, *End of All Things*, 60–61.
38. Koester, *End of All Things*, 57–62.
39. Koester, *End of All Things*, 56.
40. Koester, *End of All Things*, 122.
41. Koester, *End of All Things*, 123.
42. Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 123–26.
43. Koester, *End of All Things*, 126–27.
44. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 611–12.
45. Koester, *End of All Things*, 156.
46. Koester, *End of All Things*, 161.
47. Osborne, *Revelation*, 644.
48. Koester, *End of All Things*, 165–66.
49. Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 86.
50. Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 145–47.



51. Koester, *End of All Things*, 79–80.
52. Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 146.
53. Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 96.
54. Koester, *Revelation*, 113.
55. Other readings are quite possible; see, for example, *Doctrine and Covenants 77:7*. My reading follows from interest in Revelation as a guide to living as a disciple in the present.
56. Koester, *End of All Things*, 87.
57. Koester, *End of All Things*, 90.
58. Resseguie, *Revelation*, 251.
59. Greg Carey, *Apocalyptic Literature in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), 130–31.
60. Aune, *Revelation*, 1114.
61. Osborne, *Revelation*, 729–30.
62. Beale, *Revelation*, 1041–42.
63. Koester, *Revelation*, 806–10.
64. This also echoes the measurements of the temple environs by a man who appeared “like bronze” in Ezekiel 40–41.
65. Osborne, *Revelation*, 747–55.
66. Koester, *Revelation*, 831–35.
67. Beale, *Revelation*, 1116.