

Unit 2 Introduction

The Challenge of Reading Revelation

Most readers consider Revelation a difficult book to understand. It helps, if we are familiar with the Old Testament symbolism and numerology to which it frequently alludes. To avoid imposing our preconceived ideas on the book, we must let Scripture speak for itself. For example, the vision narrated in 5:8 mentions “bowls full of incense,” explicitly identified as “the prayers of God’s people” (see 8:3-4). Revelation acknowledges that it uses numbers symbolically (13:18; 17:9). For nearly 2,000 years, competent interpreters have agreed that it uses “Babylon” to refer to Rome (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). Both empires ruled the biblical world and both destroyed the city of Jerusalem.

Some of the imagery of Revelation may remain forever mysterious. So, we cannot be arrogantly confident that our preferred interpretation alone is correct. Instead, we should focus our attention on the book’s clear message.

Part of the challenge in reading Revelation is inherent in its origin in the visions and auditions that prompted John (Revelation 1:1, 4, 9; 21:2) to write: How was he to turn the indescribable, technicolor sights he saw and the unfamiliar heavenly sounds he heard into intelligible human words? The author had no choice but to resort to the language and imagery of his cultural, religious, geographical, political, and literary environment. His surreal narrative, bizarre characters, and grotesque imagery undoubtedly made more sense to his first readers than they ever will to us.

We know how to read historical narratives (like the Gospels and Acts). And we know how to read letters and sermons (like the other New Testament books). But how are we to make sense of the “apocalyptic” [uh-pawk-uh-LIP-tik] genre whose nearest contemporary analogies are science-fiction and fantasy literature?

Most would-be interpreters of Revelation have been misled into thinking it was intended only to predict events its readers were to expect in the distant future, at the end of time. This would imply that the book was meaningless for two millennia of earlier readers. But the book’s first verse claims the revelation was given “to show . . . what must soon take place.”

Misguided, overly confident, self-proclaimed prophecy-experts have too often turned the imagery of Revelation into the scenery of our nightmares. Some readers have been so jaded that they doubt Revelation has anything meaningful to say today. For them, Revelation has effectively ceased to function as a part of the Christian canon of Scripture.

The end-times speculations of most best-selling books, allegedly about Revelation, owe almost nothing to Revelation or any other

book of the Bible, for that matter. Their views are latter-day innovations espoused by no Christian anywhere before the 1830s. They absurdly imply that no Christian understood the book of Revelation correctly before the 19th century.

Average readers of the Bible seem surprised to learn that the word “Antichrist” nowhere appears in Revelation. It appears only in 1 and 2 John, which insist there are many antichrists, who had already come by the time these books were written. Most seem unaware that the ancient Christian creeds and our Articles of Faith offer no end-times scheme, only the hope that “the Lord Jesus Christ will come again.”

Revelation was intended to be read aloud and heard in public worship to bless both readers and hearers (1:3). Its imagery was meant to evoke an alternative vision of reality. With its message ringing in their ears and its songs in their hearts, beleaguered first century believers left their community gatherings emboldened to return to a hostile world, where the beastly power of Rome—the Evil Empire—seemed invincible. Revelation persuaded them to trust the ironic power of self-sacrificing love, convinced that the slaughtered Lamb wins (Revelation 5).

Despite the daunting challenges Revelation presents modern Western readers, this much is clear: Since the first coming of Christ, God reigns unchallenged in heaven (11:15). Despite appearances to the contrary on earth, God will win in the end.

Revelation 11—15 employ lavish imagery to explain repeatedly how God asserts His right to rule. After plagues of judgment like those of Egypt, God achieves victory, not by the death of the oppressors’ firstborn, but ironically by the death of His Firstborn (11:7-14; 12:5).

Revelation 16—19 gives us the unpleasant reminder that judgment is the essential counterpart of redemption. Judgment discloses God’s holy revulsion against evil. God’s wrath is motivated, not by vengeance, but by an insatiable desire that sinners repent (see Romans 2:1-11). Sadly, many refuse (Revelation 9:20-21; 16:9-11). But God’s purposes for the world will not be thwarted.

With Christ’s first coming, God exercised His sovereign claim on this rebellious world (11:17-18). The future is now. Satan has been defeated (12:8-10; Luke 10:18; John 12:31). God wins! But heaven’s victory is not yet an earthly reality. Still, the Revelator’s optimistic faith is that in the end, “All nations will come and worship” the Lord God Almighty (15:4).

And what are Christians to do between the times? Worship! How should we celebrate God’s present reign in heaven as we await His future reign on earth? Worship! Revelation challenges us to pray,

live holy lives, steadfastly and peacefully resist compromise with evil, worship God, sing hymns, and share sacramental meals together (Revelation 19). In other words, we are to be the church of Jesus Christ! Worship is to be our way of life, whether we are gathered or scattered.

We are not about to embark on a study of revelations of the last days, but of “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word “revelation” appears in the book just once—only in Revelation 1:1. And it is all about Christ!

What should characterize the church whose foundational conviction is that God has been definitively revealed in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth—crucified, risen, and reigning? Hopeful worship! We sing songs of hope in the darkness of a world in rebellion against its Creator, Redeemer, and rightful Lord. Compromise is never an option (Revelation 13).

The Greek verb *proskyneō*, usually translated “worship,” originally referred to falling down (*pros*) to kiss (*kynēō*) the ground in the presence of the divine (see Revelation 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). Of course, precisely how we give heartfelt, bodily expression to our total dependence on and submission to God alone may vary in different cultural and historical settings.

For example, the apostle Paul urged his churches to greet fellow believers with a “holy kiss” (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12). And there are still places where touching cheek-to-cheek and kissing the air is expected. But most are content with a warm handshake or friendly hug.

The English word “worship” was originally spelled “worthship.” It referred to treating something as particularly valuable. True worship requires both an inward attitude and visible expression of our unconditional allegiance to God—unrivaled love, respect for, and commitment to obey God above all others. Worshiping God means continually recognizing and acknowledging that God alone is worthy to receive praise, honor, and thanksgiving for all we are, achieve, and possess (Revelation 4:9-11). Every living creature owes perpetual worship to both Father and Son; both are worthy of praise, honor, glory, and dominion (Revelation 5:13-14).

Curiously, the Greek word *proskyneō* (“worship”) is common in the Gospels, Acts, and in Revelation, but almost completely absent from the New Testament letters. Paul referred to “worship” in Romans 12:1, using a different Greek root (*latreia/latreuō*; see also Hebrews 9:1; 10:1; 12:28). He insisted that “true and proper worship” entailed offering our bodily existence completely and unreservedly to God as “a living sacrifice.”

Worship in this sense cannot be confined to specifically religious acts, at sacred times, and in holy places. In fact, such worship is best

translated “service” (see Romans 1:9; Matthew 4:10; Luke 1:74; Acts 7:7; Philippians 3:3).

Worship in Revelation

Following the book’s prologue (1:1-20) and letters of encouragement and warning to the seven churches of western Asia Minor (today’s Türkiye; 1:21—3:22), Revelation begins with a vision of worship in heaven (chaps. 4 and 5). There, the worship of God is continuous (4:8)—“Day and night they never stop.”

The mediating angel twice explicitly commands the Revelator: “Worship God!” (19:10 and 22:9), and no other. In Revelation, God refers not only to the Father, but also to Jesus Christ.

Revelation takes for granted that everybody worships someone. “*Proskyneō* (‘worship’) occurs in heavenly scenes (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 15:4; 19:4; 20:4), as well as earthly ones where evil powers are worshiped (9:20; 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20). This contrasts worship of God with the idolatrous worship of the emperor/Rome.”¹

Revelation insists that no human being or institution deserves the absolute allegiance that belongs to God alone (Acts 10:25-26; 1 Corinthians 14:25; Revelation 19:10). To be deceived into worshipping anything else is to take sides with God’s archenemy—Satan, the devil, the dragon, the beast, or his representatives. False worship is ultimately to choose death rather than life (Revelation 9:20; 12:9; 13:4-15; 14:9-11; 16:2; 19:19-21; 20:2-7).

God the Father is worthy of praise because He is the Creator of all that exists (Revelation 4:11; see 7:11; 11:16; 14:7). The worship Jesus receives in the Gospels implies more than polite respect. It hints at a dawning recognition of His divine-human status (e.g., Matthew 2:2, 8, 11; 14:33; 28:9, 17). The high Christology of Revelation recognizes the Lamb—the Son of God—as equally worthy of praise (Revelation 4:12), because His crucifixion offers universal redemption (Revelation 4:9).

Conclusion

Worship cannot be limited to the prayers and songs of gratitude and praise believers offer to God. It involves more than adoring words addressed to God in communal gatherings. Worship must also be visibly and tangibly expressed in the world, as Christians love and serve their brothers and sisters, both believers and unbelievers. Following the example of God, such service will be both creative and redemptive.

1. Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012), 41.

GEORGE LYONS is a scholar and retired professor of New Testament studies at Northwest Nazarene University.