

Revelation 5 (Week 2)

Last week we began our series on the Book of Revelation. Before sharing his visions of the end, John opens his Revelation with letters to seven churches, letters meant to transform the way Jesus' followers see themselves right now.

We started to answer some of the questions that the Book of Revelation elicits. So far, we answered the question - who is this John who wrote the Revelation? He's a man who calls himself a brother in the faith, a Jewish prophet writing visions he claimed to have received while on the island of Patmos, located off the coast of Asia Minor in present-day Turkey. This John of Patmos, was not the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, the Evangelist who wrote the Gospel according to John.

His revelation belongs to a genre known as *wartime literature*. It was written around 90 C.E. toward the end of the Roman Emperor Domitian's reign, several years after the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 C.E.

Creating scenarios of the future by pasting together verses taken from various parts of the bible, only leads to fruitless speculation. Revelation is best read as a whole, as a book with its own integrity, noting that the visions do not move in a neat chronological sequence, but often repeat and overlap, making it impossible to create a step-by-step guide to the future.

Revelation follows the typical genre of an ancient "apocalypse" in which a

representative seer goes on a journey up into heaven and then returns with an urgent message to the community. On his journey up into heaven, John sees the divine throne. God is “the One seated upon it”, surrounded by heavenly worshippers. The message is clearly about allegiance: Only God and God’s Lamb Jesus are worthy of our worship, and not the Roman emperor or any imperial power. This radical message is transformative for John and for his first century communities in Asia Minor.

John's vision pictures God in the context of a royal setting. God sits on a throne. People bow before the throne. They acclaim God with songs and with power and glory. It's what one might imagine in an eastern royal court that has been magically transported into the heavenly realm. So how does one express awe? What images best acknowledge the god-ness of God? ... Images taken from nature? ... Experiences drawn from intimacy and love? ... Or the impact of the imagery of kings, as they paraded with great armies, great fanfare, impressive pageantry, and the grand style of opulent monarchs and their courtiers? For John as for many, the greatness of God is best portrayed by using these images.

We are moved by the pageantry power, as mysterious beings, elders, living creatures, thousands upon thousands of angels parade before us. These images evoke wonder, so overwhelming and strange, that we easily forget that it is only imagery – imagination's movie crafted to express and reflect the wonderful being, the holiness and wonder of God. But this court imagery is seriously flawed, reflecting what human beings have worshipped and adored rather than what Jesus taught us

to value. Revelation's throne room scene that we entered last week continues with a vision of God holding a scroll in his hand, full of writing on both sides, and sealed with seven seals. Some have compared the scroll to a last will and testament, or even a property deed. Only a person with the proper authority to execute the will can break the seals and read the document. The scroll represents the will of God for creation, and only the one who has the authority to know and execute that will can break its seals. As a deed it could further represent God's ownership of the universe.

Hearing that "no one in heaven, or on earth, or under the earth, was able to open the scroll, or look into it", John says, "I began to weep bitterly." But one of God's servants reassures him: "Do not weep. Behold, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

The one to receive a scroll from God is first announced as the lion of Judah and the root of David. Taking heart, John expects to see the conquering messiah, the king called the Lion of Judah, standing before God's throne, and is astounded to see instead a *lamb* - and stranger still, "a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered and yet living, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God". It is an extraordinary violation of the norms of power and dignity. The one most highly honoured is a lamb looking as if it had been slaughtered - because it had been! Something quite bizarre!

To John's surprise, this supernatural creature takes the scroll as a divine voice pronounces him worthy to open it, "because you were slaughtered, and ransomed

God's holy ones from every tribe, language, people, and nation". So, John hears that this strange figure epitomizes the paradox embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, whose closest followers had recognized and publicly acclaimed him as God's appointed king, their messiah. But instead of riding triumphant into Jerusalem for his coronation, as they had hoped, their messiah was slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb, and in this slaughtered lamb, the promise of the lion-like ruler from Judah was fulfilled. The death of Christ is the way that the power of God is unleashed. It is the power of self-sacrifice that builds God's kingdom by redeeming people of every tribe and nation. The Lamb is the primary way in which Christ is identified in Revelation.

The scenes which follow show all the royal dignitaries and heavenly courtiers celebrating this powerless figure who has now been given all power. Using celebratory language drawn from Israel's worship, the heavenly entourage hail a new hero or more precisely, an anti-hero. The slain lamb was the liberator. All creation in heaven and earth acclaims the new god-image. "Worthy is the lamb!" opens for us the opportunity to turn our thinking and our living upside down.

Revelation tells us that rampant chaos may seem to be the norm, may seem to be the master of the situation, but this is not the case. The masters of darkness, evil and their domain of chaos, only give the illusion of mastery. Their reign is under attack. Christ has triumphed over them on the cross and has gathered, in his victory-parade, a people to reign with him in eternity. Even now his people are confronting the powers of darkness and shaking evil's hold on the world. The reign of the New Creation has begun.

Revelation calls people to choose between the worship of God and the worship of empire. John invites his readers to envision a new form of wealth in contrast to the wealth of the empire. The wealth of the empire is volatile and the wealth of the Kingdom of God is one of service and not exploitation of the less privileged. The visions make vivid contrasts between Christ the Lamb and Satan's agent, the beast. The visions help to alienate and separate readers from powers of idolatry and oppression, while strengthening their faith in the salvation that God provides.

Revelation shapes the way that people understand God, themselves, and their world. The book vividly portrays the powers of evil that work within the world, powers that can lead people to despair. Yet Revelation offers an even more compelling portrait of God and Christ the Lamb, who provide redemption and confident hope that God's purposes will prevail. By warning about the power of evil and presenting the promises of life in God, the book fosters faith and perseverance.

However, the mere name Revelation strikes fear into the minds of many. For some, it is associated with the world ending and the "faithful" disappearing in puffs of smoke, leaving behind only their clothes in a heap. Those who read John's graphic visions into their own lives often hear Jesus addressing them directly in these warnings that, according to John, Jesus dictated to seven "churches". When the Black Death swept over Europe in the fourteenth century, many saw the plague as the arrival of the first horseman of the Apocalypse and prayed to be counted among God's elect.

Hundreds of years later, both Catholics and Protestants battling one another in Europe, saw themselves as God's saints contending against satanic forces, as did American Christians caught up in the nightmare of the Civil War, those on both sides seeing themselves living in the final days of wrath, fighting for God's truth against evil.

Each of those turbulent events drove many people who lived through them to see themselves living in the end-time, and to strive to live as "holy ones," as God's few saints remaining on earth, hoping to enter God's kingdom. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Church of Latter Day Saints, or Mormons, proclaimed Christ's imminent return, and many still do, offering salvation to those who heed the message and prepare for the coming kingdom.

In the twentieth century, even Adolf Hitler, encouraged by his minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, apparently read himself into John's visions, as one divinely chosen to initiate what he proudly called the Third Reich, which suggested not only Germany's third kingdom but also Christ's thousand-year kingdom on earth, while countless others pictured Hitler instead as the furious and diabolical "beast" who makes war on God's people.

It is a shame that the book of Revelation has come to have such a bad reputation. It is actually a beautiful picture of God's grace: a consistent theme throughout all of Scripture. The book of Revelation is about Christ and not about how the world is going to end. Many tend to call it the book of "Revelations", but it

is not many revelations about what will happen at the end of the world. Rather, it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It is a writing that tells the reader more about the character and nature of Christ.

Conflicting interpretations are not new; even Jesus' earliest known followers - Peter, James, and Paul - apparently read Jesus' *own* message in ways that diverged - and sometimes clashed. Only sixty years after Jesus' death, John of Patmos challenged the way others - including many of Paul's followers - were preaching his message. Later generations toned down such disputes and placed both Paul's teaching and John's within what became the New Testament, which they saw as representing a single and harmonious tradition.

To whom then, did John write, and what immediate concerns impelled him to do so? While attacking the Roman enemies, John also challenged enemies within - certain followers of Jesus whom he accused of collaborating with Satan. But John wants to do more than *deliver* divine revelation: he wants to persuade his hearers that his visions are genuine - that they show how the world actually looks not to him but to God.

John writes as if his visions were unique and the only ones, sent directly from heaven, and for two thousand years, many Christians have assumed that they were, since John's is the only "Book of Revelation" in the New Testament. But John knew that he was competing with *other* prophets, and was angry that some of his hearers were also listening to the other prophets and heeding their messages.

John was one of many - Jews, Christians, and pagans - speaking in prophecy and writing books of revelation during the early centuries of the Common Era. The 1945 discoveries at Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt, where the so-called Gnostic gospels were found, also unearthed dozens of books of revelation, many previously unknown.

John denounces the other prophets whom he labels *liars*. But his fellow believers probably would have seen him, like the others, as travelling prophets who came to speak during worship. How could those listening to such prophets know whom to believe - which visions are genuine and which are false? When Israel's prophets faced these questions hundred of years earlier, they often lent credence to their prophecies by telling exactly *where* and *when* a vision had come to them.

The prophet Isaiah, for example, wrote that a vision came to him "in the year the King Uzziah died - 742 B.C.E.- while he was standing before the altar in the Great Temple in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel, opens his prophecies telling exactly where he was and when in the day "the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God". Ezekiel said he had seen the Lord enthroned upon a moving chariot of fire, borne on wheels throughout the universe by four winged creatures, with eyes all over their bodies.

When John said that he, too, saw "the heavens opened" and was "in the spirit", he described visions infused with images drawn from his prophetic predecessors. Like Isaiah and Ezekiel before him, John tells where he was, and on

what day, when he first received a vision. Like Ezekiel, John saw four winged beings around the throne which Isaiah, too, said he had seen there, singing God's praise in words like those Isaiah had heard: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty, who was, and is, and is to come!"

John would have agreed that Jesus of Nazareth, too, received visions like the stunning vision that Mark's gospel says Jesus saw as he emerged from the Jordan River, dripping with water, after John baptized him. At that moment Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart, and the spirit of God descending" upon him and heard a divine voice speaking from heaven saying, "You are my son, the beloved." No doubt John accepted the widespread reports that many who had known Jesus had "seen the Lord" alive again, just as John said that on that Sunday morning in Patmos, some sixty years after Jesus was crucified, he too, had seen the one who died and is "alive forever and ever."

John's predecessor, Paul of Tarsus, writing about forty years before John, also claimed that he had "seen the Lord" - an event that left him shocked, stunned, and temporarily blind. Paul insisted that the risen Jesus had personally revealed to him the distinctive message that he was to preach to these outsiders, the Gentiles.

What Luke later wrote in the Book of Acts glossed over the disputes between Paul and the other apostles. To validate his claim, Paul, like Isaiah and Ezekiel, mentions a specific time - "fourteen years ago" - when his "visions and revelations" were sent from God.

Whose revelations then, are genuine - Paul's or John's ? The future of the movement would turn on this question. Which would gain acceptance as "canonical"? Two hundred years later, influential Christian leaders chose *both* and wrestled them into the same New Testament canon. But during those turbulent years, some leaders suppressed an astonishing range of *other* "revelations" that Christians throughout the empire read and treasured, such as:

Revelation of Peter, Revelation of Zostrianos, Gospel of Thomas, and John's *secret* Revelation.

The powerful metaphor of Jesus as "the Lamb who was slain" will become the central christological symbol of the entire book. This scripting of Jesus as a lamb is an obvious signal not to interpret the imagery of Revelation literally, but rather metaphorically. Just as Jesus was not literally a four-legged sheep or lamb, so Revelation's other symbols and numbers should not be read literally. No one, almost no one, talks about actual horns of the head of the anti-Christ. Revelation's profound truth is not a series of predictions to be figured out, but rather a deeper-than-literal truth – a journey into God's vision of hope for our world.

Singing is a profound source of hope in the book of Revelation. More than fifteen hymns are sung in Revelation, all giving encouragement to God's people on earth from the perspective of heaven. No book of the Bible has had more influence on Western music and art than Revelation. Revelation's frequent use of hymns, doxologies, halleluiahs, amens and descriptions of heavenly liturgies serves "not for

the sake of persuading his audience to participate in the daily or weekly liturgy,” but rather “for the sake of moving the audience to political resistance ... If the author would write today, he might say: ‘Don’t salute the flag, salute God’; or ‘Don’t pledge allegiance to the state, pledge it to God’.” “Don’t let hate dominate your life, let your life be controlled by love.”

In its worship, the church is summoned to be counter-cultural and here the 21st century church is challenged because its worship is tied to the worship of the Imperial world. The question is: Who possess the true wealth? Is it the empire or is it Jesus Christ? How do we give full loyalty to God?

Amen.