

“Even the World”

Revelation 3:7–13; Revelation 4:1-5:14 (NRSV)

In the presence of the Holy One

For the next two weeks, we are going to be in the book of Revelation, hearing Jesus’ words for the churches in western Asia Minor, experiencing John’s vision of the throne of God and the saving lamb, and, finally, the culmination of the *Missio Dei* in Revelation 21 and 22.



First, I know I included a large amount of Scripture for this study, indeed, all of chapters 4 & 5 in addition to Jesus’ letter to ancient Philadelphia. I tried to abridge chapters 4 & 5 and gave up. What would I cut? These are some of the greatest scenes of worship in the whole of the Bible. We meet the Lamb who is able to open the scrolls! Read it as a whole piece, not gliding over a single word. Read slowly, even aloud, and it will move your soul.

Revelation

Revelation was written in the late first century to *encourage and comfort* powerless Christians who were being persecuted, jailed, and even killed for their faith.

This mystifying and often troubling book seems endlessly fascinating to many. Perhaps a few are bored by John’s apocalypse but, if so, I haven’t met them. Instead, most of the adult Christians I’ve met would like to understand why such a strange book is in the Bible and, at best, hear a word or message that will have abiding meaning for them.

Right at the beginning, I ask that you strive to shed any preconceived notions you have about the book, including what you saw on the Discovery channel or read in one of the *Left Behind* installments. Instead, try to come as if you were reading Revelation for the first time. Of course, that may be exactly the case for many of us. You’ll really need only two things: a Bible (NRSV or NIV 2011, preferably) and your imagination. You’re going to need to think cosmically and allow God to open new vistas for you through the presentations of John’s vision. Revelation, more than any other book of the Bible, is written to speak to your imagination, so be prepared to use it.

The beginning (chapter 1)

The book of Revelation begins simply enough. It is a “revelation” given to Jesus by God. In turn, Jesus has entrusted it to an angel who has revealed it to John, the one who wrote down what he experienced in a series of visions. (Perhaps it isn’t really so simple, after all.)

A “revelation”¹ in the sense that the word is used here is an “unveiling,” a pulling back of the curtains so that we can see the truth about the world, about God, and about what is to come.

We all lead “real world” lives filled with families and jobs and governments and politicians and wars. It has always been this way. An apocalypse, like the New Testament book of Revelation, strives to show us the cosmic struggles which, though unseen, are very real indeed.

The early Christians struggled with the Revelation of John for some time, but, in the end, settled on it being a piece of writing every bit as sacred and inspired as any of the four gospels. These Christians, collectively called the Church, embraced John’s stark visions as a word from God, a word to be heard and to be heeded.

¹ In the Greek, the word is *apokalypsis*, from which we get our word, “apocalypse.” It simply means “unveiling” or “revelation.” This type of writing is called “apocalyptic” based on both its message and its style.

The opening verses of Revelation tell us that these visions are prophetic and that we are to hear and keep them, implying that these are words we are to understand. How can we “keep what is written” if what is written makes no sense? Thus, the book itself often interprets for us the meaning of the most important symbolism.

John² has been banished to the island of Patmos, where he has visions. These begin with his opening vision of Christ. What he sees transcends the power of words to express directly, thus, much like the prophet Ezekiel, his descriptions center on comparisons, i.e., Jesus’ voice is “like the sound of many waters.” The vision draws heavily on the Son of Man imagery of Daniel 7, in which God, the Ancient One, gives the Son of Man dominion over creation. Jesus stands amid seven golden lampstands which, we are told by the book itself, represent seven churches. He holds seven stars in his hand, which we are again told in the book, represent the angels of each of the seven churches.

And the sword in Jesus’ mouth? It’s an image that we find only in Revelation where the metaphor occurs four times, culminating in Jesus’ victory on the battlefield (Revelation 19). The sword is probably a metaphor for the tongue, with its sharpness conveying the power of Christ’s words. What Jesus speaks is the truth.³ And he is about to tell it to the churches.

Being Jesus’ Church

There are seven letters to seven churches. All are actual Christian communities in western Asia minor. Each of the seven Christian communities (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) gets a different message from Jesus. A good exercise is to read each one and ask yourself which letter would be written to your own church. The specifics of the letters aren’t always easy to understand, but the thrust of each is clear. The Christians in Smyrna are encouraged in their suffering and poverty. They are rich in what matters. The Philadelphians are encouraged in their patient endurance. Jesus’ words to these churches, when laid against the warnings given to the wealthy Laodiceans, reminds us that for 2,000 years, the way of Christ has been marked by suffering, not prosperity.

The letter to Philadelphia, which means “brotherly love,” is the sort of letter any Christian community would hope to receive. The Philadelphians have kept Jesus’ word, i.e.,

The helicopter view of Revelation

Revelation is easier to understand if we grasp the big picture, what a professor of mine liked calling the “helicopter view.” Broadly speaking, the book has three sections:

Chapters 1-3 consist of John’s opening vision of Christ, and Jesus’ letters to seven churches in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

Chapters 4-11 focus on God, Christ, and a world that chooses to trust itself rather than its creator. In chapter 11, the unbelieving come to faith and the heavens ring out with the worship of God. In some ways, the book could end right there, but John’s visions retell this story beginning in chapter 12.

Chapters 12-22 are not a continuation of the story, but a second telling of the cosmic conflict between the creator and his idolatrous creation. This time the story focuses on Satan and a world in thrall to the powers that oppose God. This story culminates in God’s victory through Jesus Christ, the judgment of all people, and the arrival of the long-awaited new heavens and earth. This is the completed restoration of the cosmos and of humanity’s relationship with God.

² Though the early church held that this John was also the writer of the gospel and the NT letters bearing the name of John, this is almost certainly another John. Based on clues in the book, this John was probably Jewish and a native of Palestine who emigrated to Asia Minor. David Aune speculates that John’s knowledge of the seven Christian communities shows he was an itinerant Christian prophet in western Asia Minor. Most scholars hold that the book was written late in the first century, toward the end of the Roman emperor Domitian’s reign (81-96AD).

³ Though commentators do not seem to make much of it, every time I come to this passage, I think of Hebrews 4:12-13: “¹² Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” To my mind, this is another of those echoes of Scripture that God hopes we’ll hear.

they've been obedient to Jesus' teachings. They have also not denied Jesus' name; refusing, I suppose, to recant their faith in the face of persecution. They are patiently enduring the trials that have been set before them. They are being Jesus' church, faithful and obedient. It is that simple and that profound. Let's pray that the same will be true of us. Obedient and faithful. This is what it means to be Jesus' church.

In the throne room of God

When the fourth chapter of Revelation opens, we stand with John in the throne room of God where we witness all the company of heaven worshipping the Lord Almighty. Yet, amidst this worship there comes sadness and tears. The One on the throne holds a scroll that, unlike most papyri, is written on front and back. It is sealed with seven seals, which signifies that the seal is completely and utterly closed, for seven is the number of completion and totality. What does the scroll contain? We are not told. It could be God's plan for creation, or it could be the rest of the book. Whatever the scroll contains, there is no one, in all the heavens and the earth, who is worthy of opening it, so John begins to weep.

Then, one of the twenty-four elders comes to John and tells him that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Thus, we'd expect that John would turn to see a lion, the symbol of Israel's power and strength, standing ready to open the scroll.

Yet, when John turns, he doesn't see a lion at all. He sees a lamb. But not a cute, white, leaping little lamb. John sees a lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered. (Take a moment and read Isaiah 53:7.) This is one of my favorite moments in all the Bible. John hears "Lion" but sees "Lamb." The contrast couldn't be more striking.

We think we know what power and might are, but Jesus Christ has revealed that the truth is far from our expectation. It is the Lamb who conquers. Craig Koester writes, "What John *hears* about the Lion recalls promises from the Old Testament, and what he sees in the lamb reflects the crucifixion of Christ. Both images point to the same reality. According to the Old Testament, God promised to send a powerful and righteous ruler. These promises are not rejected but fulfilled through the slaughtered yet living Lamb, who is not a hapless victim but a figure of royal strength."⁴

It is the Lamb who takes the scroll from the hand of God, causing all the elders and cherubim to fall before the Lamb in worship, singing their acknowledgement that the Lamb, and the Lamb alone, is worthy to open the scroll. Then angels too numerous to count join the elders and the cherubim in their worship of the Lamb. The crescendo presses forward as all the creatures of all the cosmos join in the praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb. Finally, the four living creatures say "Amen!" The crucified Lamb of God has triumphed and now rules.

⁴ If someone asks me for a book on Revelation, I usually urge them to pick up a copy of Craig Koester's, *Revelation and the End of All Things*. More than any other, this book has helped me to grasp the narrative of Revelation and understand better the symbolism. It is very suitable for laypeople and received excellent reviews from biblical scholars. N. T. Wright also has published his helpful, *Revelation for Everyone*.

Apocalyptic Literature

In Greek, the word “apocalypse” means “unveiling” and it is often used to describe an entire genre of writing that was very popular in the 200 years before and the 200 years after Jesus. Authors used apocalyptic writing to describe momentous and cosmic events, often having to do with the end of the world. Apocalyptic writing was stuffed full of symbols and filled with all sorts of wild imagery. These writings report mysterious revelations and usually entail a cosmic transformation of the heavens and the earth, as well as a judgment of the dead. This literature seems very odd to us because we rarely read anything like it, but it was not odd in Jesus’ day. In the Bible, the second half of the book of Daniel is another example of apocalyptic writing.

Like all apocalyptic writings, the book of Revelation is filled with many sorts of symbols. There are colors, numbers, animals, lamp stands, buildings, plants, and so on. Some are very easy to understand, some are more obscure, and the meanings of some are probably lost to us forever. It is important to realize that the symbols in apocalyptic literature weren’t meant to conceal, but to reveal and to invest the writings with their cosmic significance. For example, in chapter 17, John is shown the Whore of Babylon who drinks the blood of the saints. We might wonder who the Whore is, but the answer is provided in verse 9, where we are told that the woman is seated on seven mountains. Anyone in the ancient world would hear this as a very thinly veiled reference to the Seven Hills of Rome, for it was Rome who persecuted the Christians. All these symbols seem strange to us, but they were not strange to readers of ancient apocalyptic literature, in which seven always symbolized completeness.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus’ death and resurrection was the most important event in human history, inaugurating God’s new world – a world reborn. Easter was a thunderous moment -- a moment when the ages met. Every Easter we celebrate God’s victory over evil, sin, and death. We celebrate new creation and life beyond the grave!

Could any words really begin to describe such events? Because our everyday language would be woefully inadequate to the task, John uses enormously provocative and fantastical word-pictures to convey the enormity of these cosmic events. He writes to encourage persecuted Christians, to show them, as powerfully as he can, that the Christian story will end well, that their own story will end well, even though the abominations of Rome make this claim seem absurd. He reminds them of the cosmic powers they battle, a battle climaxing in Jesus’ victory (Chapter 19 & 20) and inaugurating the final re-creation of “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1) where “anyone who wishes [can] take the water of life as a gift” (22:17).