



Teaching and Preaching the Book of Revelation

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The contemporary Christian has two avenues of access to the book of Revelation: a formal avenue provided by the appropriation of Revelation in the worship life of the church and an informal avenue provided by the appropriation of Revelation in popular culture. The two avenues most often do not appear to be leading to the same place!

For the contemporary Christian who follows the formal avenue as a guide to Revelation, the hymns and lectionary present a unified picture of the book's place in Christian worship. For example, a quick survey of the "Index of Scripture: Services, Psalter, and Acts of Worship" in *The United Methodist Hymnal* shows that this hymnal contains hymns that draw on texts from Rev 1:7; 4:2–11; 5:11–14; 6:12–17; 7:9–12; 19:6–9, 12; 21:1–22:5.¹ Some of the church's most well-known hymns of praise take the words of Revelation as a starting point: "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Crown Him with Many Crowns," "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name."² The words of Revelation have appealed to hymn writers across the centuries, from Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius in the fourth century ("Of the Father's Love Begotten") to Robert Lowry in the nineteenth century ("Shall We Gather at the River") and Brian

¹*The United Methodist Hymnal, Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).

²For a recent discussion of hymns based on Revelation, see Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 31–38.

The task of preaching and teaching Revelation is not to decode its mysteries for the congregation—to get it right—but to encode its social, historical, theological, and literary richness in order, with the congregation, to enter into its vision.

Wren in the twentieth century (“This Is a Day of New Beginnings”). The scriptural index of the *Revised Common Lectionary* shows that, in all three years of the lectionary cycle, readings from Revelation appear only ten times. The limited selection of texts echoes those found in hymns.³

The texts from Revelation in hymnody and lectionary are all about the glory and triumph of God: the vision of the risen Christ in ch. 1; the hymns of chs. 4, 5, 6, 7, and 19; the vision of the new Jerusalem in chs. 21–22. The worshiping Christian receives the impression of a joyous book of song and celebration. There is not a word of judgment to be found.⁴

This impression could not be more different from the impression left by the informal avenue of access to Revelation. In that avenue, the texts of praise and celebration completely disappear and the texts of judgment and warning dominate. In popular religion and culture, the word “apocalypse” functions as a synonym for “cataclysm.” A recent Google search of “apocalypse” yielded 5,210,000 entries, and they were not for hymns of praise. They linked to news stories that contain the word “apocalypse” to describe events ranging from the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, to the tsunami of December 26, 2004. They linked to the *Left Behind* books, the movie *Apocalypse Now*, and a seemingly endless stream of essays, articles, and books predicting and describing the impending end of the world.

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Because of the superabundance of references to Revelation and apocalyptic in popular culture and the circumscribed type and number of references in the formal worship life of the church, most contemporary Christians’ presuppositions about Revelation are shaped more by popular culture than by the traditions of the church that have evolved over centuries of Christian practice. This often means that Revelation is approached with a combination of fear and trepidation and rarely with a sense of wonder, awe, and expectation.

The discrepancies and conflicting images of Revelation that emerge from the formal and informal avenues of access pose a serious dilemma for the preacher and teacher in the church. The liturgical appropriations, especially in hymns, can enable the contemporary Christian to participate in the praise of God’s glory, but they shy away from bringing the worshiper face to face with the awesome mystery

³The texts are Rev 1:4–8; Rev 5:11–14; Rev 7:9–17; Rev 21:1–6, 10; Rev 22:1–5, 12–14, 16–17, 20–21.

⁴Note in particular how Rev 22 is subdivided in the lectionary. The lesson for Easter 7, Year C, is Rev 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21. The omitted verses, vv. 15, 18–19 are verses of judgment and warning. The lectionary’s tendency to omit texts of judgment is not limited to Revelation. It also governs the selection of readings from the prophetic literature and the gospels.

of God's power. Popular appropriations tend to focus on naming God's power (and its promises and perils, depending on the disposition of individual believers), but rob that power of any mystery. The point of most popular religious readings of Revelation is to figure out the plan and direction of the exercise of God's power (and then to position oneself accordingly). Similarly, popular appropriations tend to make the conflict between good and evil into some kind of parlor game, while liturgical appropriations tend to render that conflict nearly invisible.

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The interpretive dilemma is made even more complicated because the preacher and teacher cannot simply replace misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Revelation with “the” correct understanding and interpretation. As appealing as this might be, any appropriation of Revelation that honors the integrity of Revelation's mode of communication cannot offer “the” reading of Revelation, since Revelation's imagery intentionally precludes such a way of reading. To borrow popular apocalyptic language, the responsible interpreter of Revelation cannot “fight fire with fire,” because at the heart of Revelation is the ultimately uncontainable mystery of God that intentionally challenges and transcends language and categorization.

Because of the cultural fascination and popular beliefs about Revelation, the sermon must push through layers of hearers' preconceived ideas about the book.⁵

The exegetical and pastoral challenges presented by the book of Revelation are many, but they also have the potential of reviving exegetical practice as a vital part of churches' religious and spiritual life. Since even in popular appropriations, there is no simple “literal” meaning—everything about Revelation requires interpretation⁶—the book of Revelation invites preachers, teachers, and their congregations to be intentionally reflective and disciplined about what it means to interpret

⁵One assignment for my spring 2002 course on preaching Revelation was to write a brief essay addressing the issues involved in preaching this book, key sections of which I collated into one document to be the basis of class discussion. The block quotations that punctuate this paper and give it much of its structure are from that collation. For the purpose of class discussion, I did not attribute any of the quotes to particular students, so I do not know which student wrote which quotation. As the quality of the quotes makes clear, this was a perceptive and articulate group of students.

⁶Even in the tradition that reads Revelation as a precise map of the events of the “last days,” best represented in modern times by John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century and the *Scofield Reference Bible* and Hal Lindsey in the twentieth century, the book requires interpretation. The words of Revelation do not ever refer by name to “Russia,” for example—the “evil empire” at the time that Lindsey wrote *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970, and reprinted regularly ever since). It takes an interpreter to find this meaning in the text. For a discussion of the ways in which the *Left Behind* novels relate to this way of reading Revelation, see the essay by Craig Koester in this issue, pp. 274–282.

a biblical book in a context other than the context for which it was originally written. Interpreting Revelation also makes evident that the act of textual interpretation matters as part of determining how one sees God at work in the world.

Teaching Revelation is an endlessly fascinating pedagogical exercise, because it is impossible for class members (whether theology school students or lay members of an adult education class) to disengage from the material. Each member of the class has a preconception about Revelation, yet each member also has an accompanying unease that their preconception is probably not completely accurate. This combination creates an openness to learning that is not always found in New Testament classes: students are not always eager, for example, to acknowledge that their image of Jesus, usually drawn from one of the Synoptic Gospels, may be inaccurate or incomplete. But because Revelation is inherently unsettling, however one interprets it, students have no option but to enter into active interpretation.

People are anxious about the story in Revelation. They are anxious about the truths that it holds. They are anxious because they don't understand what that truth is but have been told by a fictional series as well as by some Bible studies that it depicts the end of the world in all its violence and destruction....They are anxious because even those who are not left behind are seen to suffer greatly before the "rapture."

Preaching Revelation has the same rich possibilities as teaching it, and also has its own set of challenges. As indicated above, the lectionary texts that shape the way many Christians experience Scripture Sunday to Sunday give a truncated view of the contents and purpose of Revelation. If a preacher does vary from the lectionary in order to introduce Revelation into a preaching rotation, the image of the preacher of apocalyptic is overlaid with conflicting expectations. The stereotypical and popular equation of "fire and brimstone" preaching with apocalyptic preaching makes many preachers nervous about claiming the apocalyptic witness as an integral part of daily Christian living. Moreover, many of our modes of preaching, which tend to focus on "lessons for good and faithful living," simply cannot accommodate the scope of the language and imagery of Revelation. Yet even with those impediments, the rich hymnic tradition of the church, which creates its own poetry to draw the worshiper into Revelation's poetry and imagery, contains a hint of what could be gained if Revelation were embraced more wholly as a part of the shaping vocabulary of Christian preaching and worship.

TEACHING REVELATION: EXEGESIS AS A RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Preaching to unveil the nature of God is a different, more difficult enterprise, and it requires exegetical approaches that will be unfamiliar to those who have traditionally read for concrete prophecy and moral rules.

The quotation above nicely names one issue in teaching the exegesis of Revelation: it is not enough simply to teach exegesis for one particular and carefully delineated end, because Revelation is not that kind of book. Much exegesis for preaching tends to assume that the goal of exegetical activity is to decipher the elements of the text in order to distill the text's meaning. Yet if there is one constant about Revelation it is that it constantly and consistently resists distillation of any sort.

Take, for example, its structure. The repeated series of sevens—seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls—with interlocking visions and narratives inside those series of sevens, make creating a summary or outline of the book almost impossible. Commentaries on Revelation do provide an outline for the sake of easing the interpreter's movement through the text, but all of them also identify the difficulties in providing a linear map for something that is essentially circular and repetitive in structure. Trying to answer what would seem to be a straightforward question, "When is Babylon destroyed in Revelation?" is actually quite complex. References to the city falling can be found at 16:17–21, as a result of the pouring out of the seventh bowl, accompanied by the acclamation, "It is done!" But at 17:1, the same angel who poured out that bowl invites John to come and see the judgment of Babylon, as if that judgment still awaits in the future. Another angel in 17:21 also refers to the destruction of Babylon in the future tense. This should tell the interpreter that something other than chronological mapping is at stake here.

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Perhaps more than any other biblical book, Revelation is a reminder that form and content are inextricably intertwined. One cannot distill *what* Revelation says apart from *how* it says it. Hal Lindsey writes about Rev 13:1–2, "If you will follow this Scripture from Revelation, without being bothered by the figures of speech which are used, you will see that the Bible explains the meaning."⁷ The figures of speech in Revelation are not a "bother," however; they are the linguistic medium that the author has chosen to communicate his vision of the nature of God. To try to read Revelation without being "bothered by the figures of speech" is to read some other book than the one that the prophet John wrote from the island of Patmos. To separate form and content in Revelation is to miss completely the offer of God and the human relationship to God that this book makes available in all its imagistic richness.

What is an appropriate model for exegesis of Revelation? Rather than thinking about exegesis as a way of *decoding* a biblical text, we can think about exegesis as a way of *encoding* a biblical text. Instead of understanding historical criticism or

⁷Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) 92.

any other mode of approach to a biblical text (form criticism, tradition criticism, literary criticism, sociocultural criticism) as translating the contents of a biblical text into a series of extratextual referents (whether those referents be first-century C.E. cultural phenomena or a literary form), biblical exegesis can be a way of importing those extratextual referents back into the text so that the interpreter is able to enter more fully into the world that Revelation creates.

To give one specific example, for centuries it was assumed that Revelation was written out of a particular situation of persecution against the church. The seven kings in Rev 17 were charted against what was known about the imperial succession in Rome to arrive at a date and the particular emperor responsible for the persecution. The reigning consensus view was that the text was written at a time of persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian and that everything in the book should be refracted through that lens of crisis. Yet even when that consensus view was essentially unchallenged, scholars disagreed on how to count the seven kings in Rev 17. How long did an emperor have to reign to “count”? Did imperial impostors, of which there were some during this period, “count”? The problem with this approach was not with the use of historical criticism, but with the assumption that Revelation would yield all its secrets through the application of this method.

In 1990 Leonard Thompson revolutionized contemporary study of Revelation.⁸ Through a careful reexamination of evidence about the Roman empire in the first century C.E., Thompson showed that the reign of Domitian was not a time of extreme crisis and persecution for the Christian church in Asia Minor, to which John wrote. On the contrary, the Christians to whom John wrote were by and large living a comfortable existence in the Roman empire, full participants in its economic and cultural systems.

With this new awareness and set of possibilities, readings of Revelation changed dramatically. Instead of thinking of it as a book whose primary audience was those who were marginalized and victimized by the empire, interpreters now had to think about its primary audience as those who were themselves benefiting from the power and prestige of the empire. The enemy was not the beast who persecuted and martyred Christians; the enemy was the beast who led comfortable Christians into accommodation with imperial power.

That two such opposing views of the social, political, and historical world out of which Revelation was written can be used to explain the book is a strong object lesson about understanding interpretation only as decoding. Thompson’s work and subsequent work built on it are important reminders of the complexity of understanding the dynamics of the ancient world.⁹ To read Revelation only as a document of persecution is to misread the social world out of which it emerged and so

⁸Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁹See especially Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), and Steven Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

to make distorted connections to the contemporary world. Yet the contrast between the “persecution” view and “social accommodation” view suggests that the point of learning about the historical circumstances in which the biblical texts were written is not to enable the interpreter to distill lessons—be they historical or moral—from the texts, but is to enable the interpreter to entertain a deeper and fuller set of possibilities. The first-century Christian world of Revelation knew both persecution and social accommodation, and into that social diversity John addressed the vision of God found in Revelation.¹⁰

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To think of exegesis as encoding rather than decoding is to think of exegesis not as a method for identifying what we can take out of the text, but as a method for identifying the ways in which we can enter into the text and be in community with the Christians for whom its pastoral and theological offerings were first made. David Bartlett has interpreted the use of the historical-critical method through the lens of the commandment to love God and neighbor:

We are called to love the community that shaped the Psalms and the community that read the Pastoral Epistles, even if they are different from ourselves. We are commanded to love them enough to seek to understand them.¹¹

Revelation demands an exegetical practice that enables the interpreter to be drawn more and more deeply into the text, its view of God, and a world shaped by the awesome mystery of God. When exegesis enables the interpreter to enter into a text, it is as fully a religious practice as prayer or hymn singing, because it becomes an avenue to experience God and God’s world in ever changing ways.

PREACHING REVELATION: THE AUTHORITY OF THE PREACHER AND THE PREACHING VOCATION

Another task of the apocalyptic preacher is that he or she does not attempt to con-

¹⁰Recognition of this plurality of early Christian experiences means that studies of Revelation that read primarily through the lens of persecution (e.g., Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987]) and those that read primarily through the lens of cultural accommodation (e.g., Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*) can deepen the reader’s understanding and experience of Revelation.

¹¹David L. Bartlett, *Between the Bible and the Church: New Methods for Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 143.

vince hearers that he or she is right as much as the preacher seeks to include the hearer in the unfolding drama of what God is doing in the world.

To preach Revelation, we must define prophecy as “forth telling,” the intelligent observation on the part of a witness who asserts that if certain conditions persist then the following will result. Our people participate in prophecy, unknowingly, every day when they examine situations and offer possible outcomes.

If Revelation asks the preacher and teacher to rethink exegesis, it similarly asks for a rethinking of the authority and vocation of preaching. To preach Revelation as if it were about getting it “right” is not only to miss the opportunity to involve congregations in the unfolding drama of God, as the above quote suggests; it also risks confusing the preacher’s authority and vision with John’s authority and vision.

As we approach the exegesis of Revelation not as decoding the text, but as encoding it with all its social, historical, theological, and literary richness in order to enter into its vision, the preacher is called to engage in that encoding with the congregation, not above or apart from the congregation. The prophetic authority and vocation to which Revelation summons the preacher is one that shapes how all members of the congregation are called to see God at work in the world. The preacher is called to invite the congregation into the work of witness, resistance, and celebration that shapes John’s vision.¹² Preacher and congregation are not mere observers of John’s vision; both are summoned to live in a world shaped by John’s vision of God’s awesome mystery and power.

Revelation’s message concerning evil is not offered to measure or evaluate which church or individual is better than others. It is not intended to help a church or individual escape the final judgment. The message is clear that it is meant to serve as a window through which the faith community can see the evidence that God, the creator, reigns and works in the world to accomplish God’s will.

When one preaches Revelation, one does not become John. The preacher is summoned to see the world through John’s eyes and experience the world through all of John’s senses, but John always maintains the prophetic and critical edge. John’s prophetic word is not a word to be mimicked by the preacher—the preacher simply aping John’s prophetic and apocalyptic visions as his or her own. For a contemporary preacher to use Revelation as the opportunity to name evil without acknowledging one’s own complicity in evil is to abuse the authority to preach demanded by this book. Without necessarily intending to do so, the preacher who presumes to inventory others’ evils, great and small, puts his or her own authority

¹²See the recent book by Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2005), which highlights these dimensions of contemporary appropriation of Revelation.

over that of John's, communicating that he or she is exempt from John's range of vision.

The preacher's appropriation of the visions and summons of Revelation is always subject to scrutiny by Revelation itself. Once the preacher says, "I have this vision under control; it will preach," the text of Revelation cycles by again and new possibilities emerge. To preach Revelation is wholly to place one's authority as a preacher in John's hands. Like John himself, who in a vision is given the scroll of prophetic announcement to eat, that is at first sweet as honey and then becomes bitter (Rev 10:8–11), the preacher of Revelation cannot hope to be untouched by the authority of this inherently dynamic word. ⊕

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