

Praises of the Risen Christ in Revelation

Many Catholics are afraid of the Book of Revelation. Those who try to make their way through it find much of it puzzling, especially its exotic imagery and fascination with numbers (the sevens, 666). Many also object to what they perceive as its promotion and even glorification of violence. Moreover, they tend to associate the book with fundamentalist preachers, who interpret it in terms of current events and are invariably proven wrong.

In fact, however, when read in context, Revelation promotes nonviolent resistance on the part of Christians. It is very much the book of the risen Christ, and it looks forward to the full coming of God's kingdom. It is full of hymns and doxologies in praise of God as Creator and Lord and of Christ, the Lamb of God, who fully deserves the title "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 19:16). Thus Revelation is a fitting conclusion to the New Testament and to the Christian Bible as a whole. But it takes an open mind and a fertile imagination to appreciate it.

A CRISIS AND A RESPONSE

An "apocalypse" is a narrative about a dream or a vision concerning the heavenly world or the future course of history. The term derives from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means "rev-

elation.” So the last book in the Christian Bible is alternatively called the Book of Revelation or the Apocalypse. The literary form of an apocalypse is found in the Book of Daniel and in the Dead Sea scrolls’ *1 Enoch*, as well as two large Jewish works also from the late first century A.D., known as 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch. Each of the three synoptic gospels attributes an apocalyptic discourse to Jesus (Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21).

The New Testament Book of Revelation is an apocalypse (1:1) and a prophecy (1:3) in letter form (1:4). It is written in a Semitic Greek style, and its language is generally regarded to be of poor quality. While the writer never quotes an Old Testament text directly, the book is full of biblical allusions and echoes. It features various series of “sevens”—letters (2:1–3:22); seals (6:1–8:1); trumpets (8:7–11:19); bowls (16:1–21); and endtime events (19:11–22:5).

The author of Revelation was a Jewish-Christian prophet named John. He was probably not the apostle or the evangelist. In its various forms, John was a common name among Jews. He was in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9), off the coast of western Asia Minor, for bearing witness to Christ. He claims to have been granted a vision of the risen Christ on “the Lord’s day” (1:10) and sought to share it with members of seven Christian communities on the mainland of Asia Minor. The composition of the book is usually placed in A.D. 95–96, the last years in the reign of the emperor Domitian, though it may contain earlier material from Nero’s time.

The communities addressed in Revelation were facing, or perhaps already experiencing, persecution for their Christian faith. The persecution seems to have been a limited rather than an empire-wide program that was promoted by a local political official or religious leader. It focused on the Christians’ refusal to

worship the emperor as a god as well as their refusal to worship the goddess Roma as the personification of the Roman Empire. It was said that the Emperor Domitian liked to be called “my Lord and my God.” By promoting these cults of worship, the local officials could presumably win favor with the emperor and his supporters.

In this context, the Christians of western Asia Minor had to confront the question, “Who really is my Lord and my God?” Their response—it is Jesus and his heavenly Father—would make impossible, on the grounds of conscience, their participation in cults worshiping the emperor and the goddess Roma. Revelation’s response to this crisis was to use various prayers and hymns that celebrate the risen Christ as Lord and God, on the same level as the one and only God, the Creator and Lord of the universe. These prayer texts were either already in use in the communities being addressed by John or composed by John himself. They play an important role in establishing the divine status of the risen Jesus and in encouraging fearful believers.

The epistolary address in Revelation 1:4-8 contains not only the usual identifications of the author and the recipients (“John to the seven churches that are in Asia”) but also a doxology in 1:5-6 that celebrates what God has brought about through Jesus’ death and resurrection:

5. . . . Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.
(Revelation 1:5-6)

The doxology formula (“to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”) is directed to the risen Christ. It celebrates Christ’s love for humankind that has been made manifest in his redeeming and liberating death. The expression “freed us from our sins by his blood” interprets Jesus’ death on the cross as a sacrifice that has brought about atonement for sins. The description of the new relationship with God made possible through Christ’s death (“a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father”) draws on terms used in Exodus 19:6 to describe the ancient Israelites gathered with Moses at Mount Sinai: “you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” John’s reuse of this biblical terminology attributes to the suffering Christians the dignity promised to God’s people at Sinai. So it envisions them as a priesthood charged with caring for the proper worship of God. In the context in which Revelation was composed, the point was that the risen Christ has done what no emperor could ever do. As the faithful witness and the firstborn of the dead, he is the real “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5) and the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16; see 17:14).

HYMNS IN THE HEAVENLY THRONE ROOM

In Revelation 4:1 John says that he saw “in heaven a door open,” and heard the invitation, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” As we have seen, an apocalypse is a narrative about a vision or a dream concerning the heavenly world and/or the future course of history. John’s report of his experience in Revelation 4–5 describes both what he saw in the heavenly realm and how what he saw set in motion the events associated with the full coming of God’s kingdom.

What he saw, according to chapter 4, was a throne and one seated on it (God) bathed in brilliant light and splendor. And around the throne were twenty-four elders and their thrones (twelve times two = symbols of the people of God); the seven spirits of God (the Holy Spirit times seven); and the four living creatures (see Ezekiel 1). Amidst all this spectacle, what he heard first was a song in praise of the one seated on the throne from the four living creatures:

⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,
“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”
(Revelation 4:8)

Their hymn begins with the triple “holy” found in Isaiah 6:3. Here God is first identified as the “Lord God,” which was not only a common biblical way of naming God but also the very titles being applied to the emperor. God is also called “the Almighty” (see also Revelation 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; and 21:22) instead of “the Lord of hosts.” Moreover, he is described as the one “who was and who is to come,” (see also 1:4; 11:17), a title that seems to be a development from God’s self-identification to Moses in Exodus 3:14: “I AM WHO I AM.” Note that in their hymn of praise the four living creatures speak the language of the Old Testament Scriptures in order to praise God properly.

They are joined in their hymn of praise by the twenty-four elders, who indicate their subordination to the one seated on the throne by casting their crowns before him. Their hymn takes the

form of an acclamation (“You are worthy”), the kind of praise that might be given to a great benefactor or even an emperor. In fact, some scholars think that the scene in Revelation 4 is based on what John and other early Christians might have imagined the imperial throne room to be like.

11“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”
(Revelation 4:11)

What the elders find most worthy of praise in God, who is again called “Lord and God,” is his work of creation (“for you created all things”). In the next chapter, the one who is acclaimed to be “worthy” is the risen Jesus, the Lamb of God, on the basis of his work of redemption through his saving death.

As John’s vision proceeds in Revelation 5, he sees a scroll written on both sides, with seven seals. This scroll presumably contains a description of what will be the events that make up the future course of history issuing in the fullness of God’s kingdom. The problem, as John sees it, is that no one can be found worthy enough to open it and so allow that history to move forward to its final goal.

On being reassured by one the elders that the one who is truly worthy of opening the scroll is “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (see Genesis 49:9) and “the root of David” (see Isaiah 11:1, 10), the risen Christ appears as the “Lamb” who was slain (see Isaiah 53:7). His appearance inspires “a new song” from the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders:

⁹ They sing a new song:
“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and
nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving
our God.
(Revelation 5:9-10)

As in Revelation 4:11, the new song takes the form of an acclamation (“You are worthy”). But here the acclamation is directed to the risen Christ. In fact all through Revelation, what is said about God is often also said about the risen Christ. Thus the Book of Revelation is a powerful witness to the early Christian belief in the divinity of Jesus. What made the Lamb worthy to open the seals on the book is the saving significance of his death on the cross (“by your blood you ransomed for God . . .”). The language applied to the redeemed as “a kingdom and priests” recalls the doxology in Revelation 1:5-6 and Exodus 19:6.

As the chorus grows in Revelation 5:11, they sing in 5:12 another acclamation to Christ as “the Lamb that was slaughtered” and proclaim that he is “worthy” to receive “power and wealth and wisdom and might” as gifts or attributes for his own use and to receive “honor and glory and blessing” from all of God’s creatures. The scene is reminiscent of Daniel’s vision of the heavenly court and the transfer of power from “the Ancient One” to “one like a son of man” (Daniel 7:13-14). John’s vision of the heavenly court is rounded off with another doxology in Revelation 5:13-14 in which all creation participates:

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might
forever and ever!”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

(Revelation 5:13-14)

HYMNS IN PRAISE OF GOD AND THE LAMB

The acclamation of the risen Jesus (the slain Lamb) as the only one worthy enough to open the seven seals is followed by three series of “sevens”: seven seals (Revelation 6:1–8:1); seven trumpets (8:2–11:19); and seven bowls of divine wrath or plagues (15:1–16:21). Interspersed among these septets is the central vision of the defeat of the “unholy trinity.” It consists of the beast from the land (the local political or religious leader); the beast from the sea (the Roman emperor); and the great red dragon (Satan) in 12:1–14:20. The book reaches a climax with the vision of the fall of Babylon (= Rome) in 17:1–19:10, a final series of seven eschatological events (19:11–21:8), and the vision of the New Jerusalem (21:9–22:5).

Over the centuries, interpreters of Revelation have argued about the plot or narrative movement of the book. Some view it as a series of repetitions of the same basic dynamic: punishment for the sins of the wicked, rewards for the faithful victorious ones, and the universal recognition of God’s sovereignty and justice. This approach views the work as an exercise in recapitulation. Other scholars discern in the apparent repetitions a

gradual movement toward a great climax with the appearance of the New Jerusalem near the book's end. There is something to be said for both perspectives. The book is both repetitive in its various scenarios and climactic in the appearance of the New Jerusalem.

In a study of prayers in the New Testament, what is most important is John's use of hymns or hymnlike fragments celebrating the Lord God and the Lamb at key points in the outline. In the interlude between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seals, the "great multitude" issues a word of praise: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:10). Note that God and the Lamb are treated as equals, thus reinforcing the high Christology that runs through the work. The response of the heavenly court is another doxology celebrating the seven attributes of God being manifested in the display of God's sovereignty and justice:

¹²"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen."
(Revelation 7:12)

With the blowing of the seventh trumpet, the heavenly chorus proclaims the victory of our Lord and his Messiah:

⁵And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner.
(Revelation 11:5)

In response, the twenty-four elders offer a hymn of thanksgiving:

¹⁷“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.

¹⁸The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

(Revelation 11:17-18)

The thanksgiving addresses God as the “Lord God the Almighty” and as the one who is and was (see Revelation 1:4; 4:8). The future dimension is already being enacted, or is as good as already enacted. The reign of God over all the nations (“the nations raged”) is described in terms similar to Psalm 2:1. The reign of God is also described as the time for rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked.

The central section of Revelation begins in 12:1-9 with the dragon’s pursuit of the woman—a symbolic way of depicting Satan’s persecution of the church—and the great battle in the heavens where Michael the Archangel casts the dragon/Satan out of heaven. In effect the war against evil has already been won through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, though the battle on earth goes on. The narrative in Revelation 12 is interrupted by another song from heaven, celebrating the victory of God and his Messiah:

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
“Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
¹¹But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
¹²Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come
down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!”
(Revelation 12:10-12)

The “accuser” is an allusion to Satan’s former role in Job 1–2, where he convinces God to allow Job to be tested first by loss of his possessions and family, and then by various physical afflictions. While Satan is no longer a member of the heavenly court, he is still active on earth. And in John’s view, he is the power behind the persecutions of the church that were being carried out by the two “beasts” in Revelation 13.

The third series of sevens—the bowls of wrath—is introduced by a scene in which the faithful witnesses, who have overcome, sing the “song of Moses” (see Exodus 15:1-18) and the “song of the Lamb.” They have conquered the beast (the Roman emperor), its image (a statue of the emperor), and the number 666 signifying the emperor (666 = the numerical value of the name “Nero Caesar”). The reference to the song of Moses prepares for the

seven plagues, which are closely tied to the events surrounding ancient Israel's exodus from Egypt.

³And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and amazing are your deeds,
Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
King of the nations!

⁴Lord, who will not fear
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your judgments have been revealed.”

(Revelation 15:3-4)

The individual phrases in the song come from various parts of the Old Testament: “great and amazing are your deeds” (see Psalms 111:2; 139:4); “just and true are your ways” (see Psalms 145:17; Deuteronomy 32:4); and so on. The song praises God's works and words. It asks how anyone could fail to fear and glorify God, and looks to all the nations to acknowledge God as the holy one. What is especially celebrated is that God's righteous acts and just judgments have been or soon will be revealed. These just judgments are the events that will lead up to the last judgment.

With the second and third bowls of wrath (Revelation 16:3-4), various bodies of water are turned into blood, just as the Nile River was turned into blood in ancient Israel's exodus from Egypt (see Exodus 7:17-21). The series is interrupted by more hymnic mate-

rial first from “the angel of the waters” in 16:5b-6:

⁵And I heard the angel of the waters say,
“You are just, O Holy One, who are and were,
for you have judged these things;
⁶because they shed the blood of saints and prophets,
you have given them blood to drink.
It is what they deserve!”
(Revelation 16:5-6)

This hymn celebrates the justice of God, the Holy One, in punishing those who had shed the blood of the “saints” (“holy ones” = the Christian martyrs) and the prophets (see Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34). It is fitting punishment that those who had shed innocent blood should be forced to drink from rivers and streams befouled with blood. The angel’s interpretation is confirmed by the altar (Revelation 16:7), which declares that God’s judgments are “true and just.”

The transition between the fall of the Roman Empire described before the fact in Revelation 17–18 and the final series of seven eschatological events in 19:11–21:8 is supplied by what can be called a victory liturgy in 19:1-10. The various songs feature the Hebrew word “Hallelujah” (= “Alleluia,” meaning “praise the Lord”). The “great multitude in heaven” (19:1) consists more likely of angels than Christian martyrs. Their first song (19:1b-2) interprets the fall of the Roman Empire as proof of God’s justice and as punishment for putting God’s servants to death:

¹After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a
great multitude in heaven, saying,
“Hallelujah!

Salvation and glory and power to our God,
 ²for his judgments are true and just;
he has judged the great whore
 who corrupted the earth with her fornication,
 and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”
(Revelation 19:1-2)

Their second song (Revelation 19:3) stresses the definitive character of Rome’s defeat: “Hallelujah. The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.” The members of the inner circle of the heavenly court—the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures—affirm the angelic song by saying, “Amen. Hallelujah” (19:4), which means “I believe it so. Praise the Lord.” The voice coming from the throne is most likely one of the elders or living creatures, and it too is a call for all to praise God. The final song (19:6-8) is from the entire heavenly chorus:

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,
 “Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
 the Almighty reigns.
⁷Let us rejoice and exult
 and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
 and his bride has made herself ready;
⁸to her it has been granted to be clothed
 with fine linen, bright and pure”—
 for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.
(Revelation 19:6-8)

It first celebrates the establishment of God's reign in its fullness. Then in Revelation 19:7b-8 it describes this event as the wedding feast of the Lamb. The image is based on various Old Testament passages (see Hosea 2:16-22; Isaiah 54:5-6; 62:5; Ezekiel 16:6-14) that portray God's relationship with Israel in terms of a marriage. Thus, in turn idolatry is described as fornication or prostitution (see Hosea 2:4-15; Ezekiel 16:15-63). Here the bride of the Lamb is the people of God, which in Revelation is the church. In contrast to ancient Israel, which according to the prophets fell repeatedly into idolatry, the church is a faithful bride. In contrast to the prostitute Roma who dresses garishly like a prostitute (see Revelation 17:1-6), the church-bride wears "fine linen, bright and pure," which is symbolic of moral purity and her fidelity in facing martyrdom. An interchange between the angelic interpreter and John rounds off the passage in 19:9-10.

"COME, LORD JESUS"

The final verses in Revelation (22:6-21) appear to be a collection of disparate sayings, much like the end of the book of Daniel (12:4-13). The ten sayings revolve around three major themes: the authenticity of the prophet's message, the imminence of the Lord's coming ("I am coming soon"), and exhortations to remain faithful. Since these are major themes in the book, the ten sayings constitute a fitting summary or epilogue.

The tenth and final saying (Revelation 22:20b-21) has two parts. The first part (22:20b) is a prayer expressing the hope that the risen Christ will return soon: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" It is the Greek form of the same prayer quoted in its original Aramaic wording in 1 Corinthians 16:22: "Maranatha." In Aramaic the term for "our Lord" is *maran* or *marana*, depending on the

dialect, and the singular imperative for “come” is *atha* or *tha*, depending on the dialect. The fact that Paul quoted it in Aramaic suggests that it was a very early Christian prayer, going back to the Palestinian Jewish Christian community. The prayer is an appropriate way to close the Book of Revelation, since the second coming of Jesus will be the pivotal factor in the full coming of God’s kingdom.

The second part (Revelation 22:21) of the final saying is a wish that is at the same time a prayer: “the grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.” Similar blessings appear at the end of many other New Testament epistles (1 Corinthians 16:23; 2 Corinthians 13:13; and so on). Whether it was written by John or added later by a scribe, it provides a nice complement to the prayer for Jesus’ second coming in 22:20b. It asks God in the time between the first and second comings of Jesus for the divine favor or “grace” to sustain us and give us peace so that we might live in faith, love, and hope. Taken together, these two prayers are a fitting conclusion to the Christian Bible, since as Christians we walk between the times of Jesus’ first and second comings.

BRINGING THE CONTEXTS TOGETHER

Those who have worked through this book will recognize that the Revelation is not as strange as it may once have seemed. The language of the book is thoroughly biblical. Even though John never speaks explicitly about Scripture being fulfilled, almost every verse contains an allusion to or an echo of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the theological context—the saving significance of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and hope for his second coming—places the Old Testament in a decidedly new context. And

as we have seen throughout this book, context is everything, or at least almost everything.

The basic theology of Revelation is not far from that of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4). John tries to envision and depict what he imagines the full coming of God's kingdom will be like—when all creation “hallows” the name of God, and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. He also tries to describe what all this might mean for the faithful remnant. While they can and should look forward to eternal life with God, they will nevertheless undergo trials and tribulations. Therefore, as they wait patiently and nonviolently, they will need physical and spiritual sustenance or “daily bread,” forgiveness of sins or “trespasses,” and deliverance from evil or “the evil one.”

The Book of Revelation has exercised enormous influence on Christian music. It has been the inspiration for such popular hymns as “Holy God, We Praise Thy Name,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “We Shall Overcome,” and many other popular Christian hymns. The famous “Hallelujah Chorus” in Handel's *Messiah* (“King of kings and Lord of lords”) is right out of the Book of Revelation. The hymnic pieces scattered throughout the book illustrate the power of song in prayer. As we have seen, whenever John wishes to highlight a moment or event in one of his apocalyptic scenarios, he inserts a hymnic piece. So great is his faith and joy that he can only express them adequately through songs. Thus he confirms the principle that those who sing pray twice.

There is no need to fear the Book of Revelation. Read it in its biblical context and its historical and literary contexts with the Lord's Prayer as your guide, and enter into its hymns in praise of the one who truly is “King of kings and Lord of lords.” Make its praises your own.

Think, Pray, and Act

Consider how the hymns of praise in Revelation might enrich your appreciation of Jesus and your own way of praying.

Think

- 🌀 How do the hymnic parts of Revelation portray Jesus in relation to God the Father?
- 🌀 Does reading Revelation in light of the Lord's Prayer help you understand the book better?
- 🌀 What might it mean today to proclaim the risen Jesus as "King of kings and Lord of lords"?

Pray

- 🌀 Imagine yourself alongside John the Seer in the heavenly court in Revelation 4–5. What do you see? What do you hear? How might you respond?
- 🌀 Imagine yourself as part of the "victory liturgy" in Revelation 19:1-10. What do you see? What do you hear? How might you respond?

Act

- 🌀 Some hymnbooks note the biblical origin of the words in their songs. If you have access to such a hymnal, look for hymns inspired especially by the Book of Revelation.