

Study Guide for the Book of Revelation

Approaching the Book of Revelation: Initial Reflections

Assigned Reading: The Revelation of John, Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, chapter 30

After you listened to the lecture, and have done the reading in Powell, the study guide has a twofold purpose:

- 1) To facilitate continued reflection and integration of the material by appropriating in the reading of select themes and passages in the book of Revelation.
- 2) To provide focus questions for group discussion of the book of Revelation in the light of the lecture and the reading.

Before you work through the study guide do the following:

- Make a brief list of the ideas and insights you encountered in the lecture and the textbook that challenged your working assumptions about the book of Revelation.
- Make a list of questions you would like to investigate further or discuss with others engaged in the class.

In interpreting material such as the book of Revelation one important goal is to get a sense of the narrative as a whole. Read through the book of Revelation again in one sitting and do the following:

- Summarize in your own words what you think Revelation is about.
- Make a list of important themes and some of the ways your own understanding of Revelation is different from what you heard in the lecture and read in Powell. Identify important questions the lecture and reading raised for you, and select key ideas and passages you would like to revisit.

Deeper Engagement with the Book of Revelation

As had been noted in the lecture of the book of Revelation, the very first word in the entire narrative is the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means “revelation.” In the world behind the text, an apocalypse is a type of literature in which a human seer (in this case it is an individual named John, Rev 1:1,4,9; 22:8) is given a divine revelation involving temporal realities and eternal realities. The temporal realities involve the truth behind the events and structures of this age, especially as they relate to power being wielded by those who are enemies of God’s faithful people. The eternal realities involve God’s sovereign judgments and plans in which there will come a point of divine intervention at which time God will triumph over the evil powers-that-be which are in apparent control of this age, and God’s faithful followers will be vindicated. The apocalyptic genre goes back to the time of the Maccabees in 167 BCE, and examples of this type of literature are found in both Jewish circles and Christians circles. It is important to reemphasize that the book of Revelation is not so much a prediction of future events as it is a condemnation of the current social, political, and economic structures of the imperial world of the Roman Empire at the end of the first century. In this imperial culture which dominates the world behind the text, the vast majority of the population and its ruling elite celebrate how the gods of the Romans have blessed the earth by providently bestowing universal peace and

prosperity through the Roman imperial order. In this society, people are quite content at the prospect of living within the Roman order. Indeed in the eastern urban areas of Asia Minor (the locations of the seven churches to which John writes in Revelation 2-3) the imperial cult enjoyed wide popularity and daily sacrifices to the emperor were a common feature of all non-Christian and non-Jewish religious rituals.

While presenting a scathing attack and theological critique on the imperial powers-that-be, apocalyptic literature seeks to fortify its audience by calling for tenacious faith which resists accommodations with evil and to offer hope by presenting cosmic and mythic visions of God's ultimate control over heaven and earth. In this respect, the book of Revelation is quite at home in the apocalyptic tradition. Thus Revelation is seeking to bolster the loyalty and tenacity of a minority community of faith so that they live their lives not in conformity to the ways and values of the dominant culture but in ongoing, faithful worship of God and Jesus Christ, who are actually the ones in control over all reality on earth and in heaven. Indeed, Revelation regards worship as perhaps the ultimate subversive act because through worship one is rejecting the structures and myths of the imperial dominant culture and giving ultimate honor to God and Christ alone.

As was noted in the lecture and the reading on Revelation, three extensive cycles of judgments are presented centering on the number seven so that cosmic catastrophes are unleashed at the breaking of the seven seals (Revelation 6:1-8:5), the blowing of the seven trumpets (Revelation 8:6-11:19), and the pouring out of the seven bowls (Revelation 15:1-16:21). Interestingly enough, however, the narrations of the final destruction of Babylon (the literary and theological moniker for Rome), the kings of the earth, and the satanic beasts are quite terse and lack extensive literary details or embellishments.

Rather than serving as a set of theological tarot cards seeking to predict events and timetables leading up to a seven-year period of tribulations ruled by the anti-Christ (none of which is contained in the book of Revelation!), the book of Revelation presents an extensive vision of God's ultimate reality, the new heaven and new earth in which absolute peace, harmony, and worship prevail.

An Exercise in the Practice of Interpretation

The following is an exercise for you to do on your own in which you will apply what you are learning about Revelation by investigating in a little more depth. Keep notes to help you with you with the group discussion that follows.

- Read Revelation 6:1-8,12-17; 9:20-21; 18:1-24. Briefly describe the way Revelation seeks to attack the myth of peace, harmony, and prosperity established by the gods through the Roman imperial order. In these passages how does the general populace respond to the divine signs and enactments of judgment against the Roman imperial order? What is the book of Revelation seeking to tell its Christian audience about the outward structures of society?
- Read Revelation 4:1-11; 7:1-17; 14:1-7; 15:1-4; 19:1-10. Briefly describe the atmosphere of the divine throne room. What are some of the core components of worship

which you note in these scenes? How would these scenes provide both reassurance and hope for minority Christian communities existing at the fringes of a dominant imperial culture? How might our worship practices and patterns more fully reflect those envisioned here in Revelation?

- Read Revelation 16:18-21; 17:15-18:8; 19:19-21; 20:7-10. Briefly describe the facets of the divine defeat of God's earthly and demonic enemies. What strikes you as the central focus and thrust of these depictions? How are these depictions meant at the same time to serve as dire warnings and offer hope?
- Read Revelation 21:1-22:5. Briefly describe the facets of this vision of God's new heaven and new earth. What images are most striking and appealing to you? What images offer hope and reassurance especially in the midst of suffering, pain, and turmoil? Ultimately what do you hear the author of Revelation telling Christians in the first century as well as in the twenty-first century about the present and the future?

Discussion Questions

- Prior to this unit, what had been your experience with and exposure to the book of Revelation? Had those exposures been positive or negative? Reassuring or frightening? Clarifying or confusing? As a result of this unit, how do you now understand the book of Revelation? What areas of the book and its interpretation have become clearer for you? What areas of the book and its interpretation are still confusing or obscure to you?
- Why do you think some Christian communities hold Revelation very near and dear to their views of God and the world? Why do you think some Christian communities hold Revelation at a distance and rarely delve into its contents or claims?
- How might Revelation serve as a warning to our own dominant culture of prosperity? In what ways might the book of Revelation critique Christian accommodation with the world in which we live?
- How might a "left behind" type of Revelation be not only unbiblical but also dangerous?
- What vision or claim of Revelation offers you true hope and helps fortify your faith for daily living and worship of God and Jesus Christ?