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# Breaking the Code: Interpretive Reflections on Revelation

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Revelation has always been a mysterious, intriguing and controversial book. William Tyndale, that great pioneer of the modern English translation of the Bible, said in the sixteenth century: 'The Apocalypse or Revelations of John are allegories whose literal sense is hard to find in many places'.<sup>1</sup> My favourite line, however, is that of G. K. Chesterton at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'And though St. John the

Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators'.<sup>2</sup> Books such as Arthur W. Wainwright's *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation*<sup>3</sup> and Paul Boyer's *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophetic Belief in Modern American Culture*<sup>4</sup> are readable, insightful volumes documenting the controversy, intrigue and abuse of Revelation in the history and life of the church.

There are, of course, virtually countless contemporary examples of Revelation's power and intrigue, not the least of which is the eight-volume *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins,<sup>5</sup> which sold over sixteen million copies and

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<sup>1</sup> William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (Antwerp, 1528; ed. David Daniell; London/New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; Fontana, 1961), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge/London: Harvard UP, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> *Left Behind, Tribulation Force, Soul Harvest, Nicolae, Apollyon, Assassins, The Indwelling, and The Mark* (Wheaton: Tyndale, since 1995).

which received further attention in February 2001 with the premier of the movie *Left Behind* in theatres across the United States.

In the early church, Revelation was already a controversial document. Papias, an early second century bishop attested by Irenaeus, Eusebius and Jerome, was, according to Eusebius, a millennialist. Although his views are not explicitly connected with a reading of Revelation, Eusebius reports this about Papias:

He says that after the resurrection of the dead there will be a period of a thousand years, when Christ's kingdom will be set up on this earth in material form. I suppose he got these notions by misinterpreting the apostolic accounts and failing to grasp what they had said in mystic and symbolic language. For he seems to have been a man of very small intelligence, to judge from his books.<sup>6</sup>

This passage clearly indicates the fundamental divide that has characterized the centuries-long debates within the church: should Revelation be read 'literally' or 'symbolically'? We still live with this option as the controlling question. This is not the place to give an account of all of the debates within the early church, but it should be noted that the so-called symbolic-interpretive scheme won the day. This was represented in Augustine's powerful interpretation of Revelation and in an action of the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in AD 431, which condemned the belief in a literal millennium as superstition.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39. Translation of G. A. Williamson, *Eusebius, The History of the Church* (London/New York: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 152.

What should be noted further from the early church is that all of this controversy led to some debate over whether Revelation should be included in the canon of the New Testament. Eusebius' rather well-known discussion of the New Testament writings divides them into four categories<sup>7</sup>: the recognized, the disputed, the spurious, and, the impious, foul books. What is striking is that he lists Revelation twice—it is in the recognized books and in the spurious, not the disputed, books! It is clear that Eusebius does not see Revelation as disputed (although it is) but rather as a book which divides authorities into two camps: those who confidently accept it and those who firmly reject it. Of course, we know that those in the first group carried the day.

It is tempting to attempt a sketch of the history of the interpretation of Revelation from the time of Augustine to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but there is not time for that now, nor is that my purpose. Rather, I wish to further point out two additional interpretive crises concerning Revelation that go beyond and/or are apart from the well-known fundamental divide of the so-called literal and symbolic approaches.

The writer D. H. Lawrence, who died in 1930, wrote in some detail on Revelation. Among other things he said:

The Apocalypse of John is, as it stands, the work of a second-rate mind. It appeals intensely to second-rate minds in every country and every century.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

Lawrence called Revelation the 'Judas' among the books of the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

But, such a negative view is not only that of a man of letters who rejected Christianity. Charles Henry Dodd, one of the most famous New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, wrote in one of his early books, *The Gospel in the New Testament*, published in 1926, the following assessment of Revelation:

[H]ints of the authentic Christian Gospel are sadly overweighted by the force of passionate feeling behind the visions of judgment, vengeance, and destruction. The gospel of the Revelation, in a word, is a one-sided gospel... The author of Revelation has brooded too much, and his vision is out of focus.<sup>9</sup>

Dodd notes what must admittedly be seen as one of the interpretive issues of Revelation for persons today: the apparently judgmental, vindictive and violent character of so much of Revelation. How are the portrayals of God and Jesus Christ against the enemies in Revelation to be related to the stress in the gospel on the mercy and love of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ?

Further, in addition to the concern over Revelation as a book of vindictiveness and vengeance, there has developed in the late twentieth century a significant so-called feminist critique of Revelation. Revelation, it appears, provides two images of women. One is positive, represented

in the majestic woman of Revelation 12, the mother of the messianic ruler and of the believers, and the Bride of the Lamb in Revelation 19 and 21. The other is negative, represented in the false teacher Jezebel in Revelation 2 and in the whore who oppresses the church in Revelation 17.

Both, it is asserted by some feminist interpreters, depict women in classic, male-dominant modes: the adorned and subservient mother/wife and the evil woman who is sexually impure. Added to this is the description of the faithful followers of the Lamb in Revelation 14 as virgin men who have never defiled themselves with women.

The most forceful feminist critique of Revelation today is that of Tina Pippin, expressed in particular in two books, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*, and *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*.<sup>10</sup> Pippin writes:

Women readers of the Apocalypse are typed, hunted, adorned, and rejected. The domination of male over female remains intact... In the political realm women are defeated or banished to the wilderness; only the submissive, sexual Bride is allowed at the utopian feast of the Lamb... [The] men who enter her must be ritually pure, and the female figures with any sexual autonomy... are pushed out or to the edge... The Apocalypse is not a tale for women. The misogyny which underlies

<sup>8</sup> The information on D. H. Lawrence is drawn from Wainwright, pp. 199-200; the quotation is found on page 199.

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Gospel in the New Testament* (London: The National Sunday School Union, n.d. [1926]), pp. 62-63.

<sup>10</sup> Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), and *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999).

this narrative is extreme.<sup>11</sup>

So, Pippin concludes: 'What remains is the misogyny and exclusion by a powerful, wrathful deity. In the Apocalypse, the Kingdom of God is the kingdom of perversity'<sup>12</sup>.

Given the history of controversy over Revelation and the various challenges indicated here to understanding Revelation, it is my intention to attempt to provide some interpretive reflections on Revelation and thus, perhaps, contribute to 'breaking the code', to borrow the title of Bruce M. Metzger's very helpful little book from 1993.<sup>13</sup> In order to do this, I would like to address three broad areas for interpretive reflection:

- (1) the purpose and theology of Revelation;
- (2) four perspectives for a sound approach to the interpretation of Revelation; and
- (3) six suggestions for reading and hermeneutically applying Revelation as the Word of God in our own contemporary situations.

### The Purpose and Theology of Revelation

Of course, one should, perhaps, be cautious about treading where angels fear to tread! I am reminded of a Charles Schulz cartoon in which one person says to another: 'I used to consider myself an authority on the Book of Revelation, but one day I came across somebody who had

read it.'

Scholarship on Revelation abounds in our time. Just in the past four years, we have seen the appearance of several new and important commentaries on Revelation, including the mammoth works of David Aune and Gregory Beale, along with those of Robert Mounce, J. Ramsey Michaels, Frederick Murphy and Leonard Thompson, to name, I assure you, just a few.<sup>14</sup>

Revelation is fundamentally a prophetic, positive word of hope for the church and a deep call and encouragement to faithful discipleship. Revelation is neither a doomsday document nor an eschatological exotica. Revelation is a text about God Almighty and Jesus Christ, their victory over Satan and evil, and their vindication and deliverance of the 'faithful witnesses of Jesus' (the church). Revelation calls the church to worship and to follow the Lamb in

<sup>14</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Word Biblical Commentary 52A; Dallas: Word, 1997); *Revelation 6-16* (Word Biblical Commentary 52B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998); *Revelation 17-22* (Word Biblical Commentary 52C; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998); Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999); Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*. 2nd ed. (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 1997); Frederick J. Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon: The Revelation to John* (The New Testament in Context; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998); J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (IVP New Testament Commentary Series; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); and Leonard L. Thompson, *Revelation* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998). See also the review article of most of these works by Paul B. Duff, 'Reading The Apocalypse at the Millennium', *Religious Studies Review* 26 (2000), pp. 217-21.

<sup>11</sup> Pippin, *Death and Desire*, pp. 104-05.

<sup>12</sup> Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

obedient, faithful discipleship.

Although Revelation is about ultimate destinies, including the glorious 'marriage supper of the Lamb', and is thus an eschatological text, it is more than anything else a call to faithful discipleship for the believers in the seven churches addressed. They are in danger of compromising their devotion to Jesus Christ by participation in the imperial cult of worshipping the Roman Emperor and by participation in the comforts of the world which lead to a false confidence in oneself and a rejection of dependence upon God and Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Revelation is actually common early-church theology addressed to a particular situation of potential compromise within the church. Its theology is presented in apocalyptic-symbolic terms, on which we will shortly comment, but its fundamental theological commitments can be summarized in four clear affirmations.<sup>16</sup>

(1) God and Jesus Christ are victors in the struggle of life and death, good and evil; the victory, in fact, has already been achieved in Christ and his death, resurrection and exaltation

and, therefore, there is genuine hope for the future. Think of the power of one of the opening words in Revelation at the end of the first century in the Roman Empire during the reign of Domitian, the first Caesar, according to Suetonius, to use regularly for himself the titles 'Lord' and 'God': '...Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings of earth' (1:5).<sup>17</sup>

(2) The people of God, the church, 'the faithful and true witnesses of Jesus', as they are called in Revelation, will be vindicated and will know the glory of eternal presence and fellowship with God and Jesus Christ. The closing words of the body of Revelation's visions are powerful—and connect with the text just noted above (1:5)—: '... and they [God's servants who worship the Lamb] shall reign for ever and ever' (22:5).

(3) The people of God do suffer, face opposition and difficulty and even death; there is a reality to the power and work of Satan and his human agents against God's people. Much of Revelation consists of various descriptions of the attack of Satan and Satan's agents, on the church.

(4) The people of God are called to be faithful and true. In this sense, Revelation is in the deepest and ultimate way a call to discipleship. In its first century setting it is calling believers to follow and worship only the Lamb; they are not to follow the false teachers who encourage believers to

<sup>15</sup> For an important study which nuances the situation the original recipients of Revelation faced, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> For more detailed study of the theology of Revelation, see at least Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Donald Guthrie, *The Relevance of the Apocalypse* (Didsbury Lectures, 1985; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans/Exeter: Paternoster, 1987); and Sophie Laws, *In the Light of the Lamb: Imagery, Parody, and Theology in the Apocalypse of John* (Good News Studies 31; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

worship the Emperor in the imperial cult and/or otherwise compromise their allegiance to the worship of Jesus Christ and God.

Understanding Revelation as a call to discipleship in difficult and compromising times, more than as an eschatological 'map' may be a new approach to this text for some. It may be important simply to hear a collage of twenty-five texts from Revelation that make clear this emphatic call:

- (1) '...blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written....' (1:3);
- (2) 'I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance....' (1:9);
- (3) 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.... I also know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name....' (2:2-3);
- (4) 'To everyone who conquers....' (2:7; repeated six other times: 2:11, 2:17, 2:28, 3:5, 3:12 and 3:21);
- (5) '...you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one....' (2:13);
- (6) 'I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance' (2:19);
- (7) 'Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent' (3:3);
- (8) 'Because you have kept my word of patient endurance....' (3:10);
- (9) 'Be earnest, therefore, and repent' (3:19);
- (10) '...I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given.... They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed' (6:9-11);
- (11) 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (7:14);
- (12) 'But 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' (12:11);
- (13) '...those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus' (12:17);
- (14) 'Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints' (13:10);
- (15) '...these follow the Lamb wherever he goes' (14:4);
- (16) 'Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus' (14:12);
- (17) '...those who had conquered....' (15:2);
- (18) '...Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed....' (16:15);
- (19) '...and those with him are called and chosen and faithful' (17:14);
- (20) '...for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints' (19:8);

- (21) '...who hold the testimony of Jesus....' (19:10);
- (22) '...beheaded for their testimony to Jesus....' (20:4);
- (23) 'Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book' (22:7);
- (24) '...with those who keep the words of this book' (22:9); and
- (25) '...to repay according to everyone's work.... Blessed are those who wash their robes....' (22:12, 14).

### **Four Perspectives on Interpretation**

With the theology of Revelation clearly in mind, I believe that there are four primary and crucial perspectives for a sound approach to the interpretation of Revelation. The appropriateness of these perspectives is broadly shared and affirmed among major scholars today involved in the study and interpretation of Revelation.

(1) The beginning point for the interpretation of Revelation is the same as for any other text in the New Testament: its original setting, function and purpose. The Revelation of John is, in fact, addressed to a group of seven actual churches in the Roman province of Asia. It is concerned with the life and faith of these believers, who are under various forms of pressure to deny their commitment to Jesus Christ. Among other things, this means that Revelation addresses the concerns and situation of the original first century AD readers and assumes that they could understand what was written in the text within their own cultural, social

and historical context, even if, by divine design, the text also pointed to ultimate eschatological realities beyond the experience and understanding of the original recipients. This assumption is clear in the opening prologue in which John wrote: 'Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near' (1:3). Even what some regard as the most 'famous' text in Revelation, the mention of the number of the first beast, later known as the Antichrist, 666, is given with the assumption that the original recipients would understand it: 'This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person' (13:18). The epilogue to Revelation (22:8-21) strongly implies that the original recipients will understand this text and are obligated to obey and preserve it. This perspective, which is not meant to deny that Revelation has a genuine eschatological, futuristic dimension and truth, does have far-reaching implications for the interpretation of all the details of Revelation: they are understandable and have meaning within the context of the first century AD recipients in the church and of their setting within the Roman Empire.

(2) Revelation, which is by its own testimony a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia and a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), is written in the apocalyptic genre known to us from numerous examples in Second Temple Jewish



literature. This apocalyptic literature attempts to face with absolute seriousness the deep and disturbing questions: Why do God's faithful people suffer at the hands of the wicked oppressors? Does God not care? Will there ever be vindication for the faithful?

Apocalyptic literature in its very character presents its answers in deeply symbolic language that the faithful would be able to understand (and, perhaps, that the unbelievers might not grasp). It speaks to their present suffering and sense of defeat by declaring that God will intervene, usually through an agent (the 'messianic' deliverer), and rescue and reward the faithful. This symbolic language of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition carries with it the rhetoric, for example, of vengeance and violence, of dramatic signs in the heavens, of number symbolism, of strange beasts, of revealing angels, of cataclysmic and cosmic upheavals and more.

A significant part of the power of apocalyptic literature is its very symbolism. In Revelation, for example, the person of Jesus Christ is rarely called by that name; usually he is identified as the Lamb. The symbol of the slain yet powerful Lamb is what makes Revelation compelling and cogent. The same points could be made in ordinary, prosaic terms, but then the power and intrigue are lost. In some ways, C. S. Lewis' famous *Narnia Chronicles* are a wonderful example of the compelling power of symbolic language. For Lewis to have written the 'truths' of these stories in 'literal' or prosaic

language would have destroyed their appeal and power.

Among the numerous Second Temple Jewish apocalyptic texts such as the Apocalypse of Abraham, 2 Baruch, 1 Enoch, Testament of Moses and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the most important such work for understanding the apocalyptic genre of Revelation would be Fourth Ezra. This work is chapters 3-14 within what in the Old Testament Apocrypha is known as Second Esdras.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth Ezra is comprised of seven angelic visions (take note) given to Ezra to deal with the suffering of the Jewish people and their vindication and deliverance by God. The text is too long to review here in detail, but simply reading a few passages might in itself speak with power to the issues of the apocalyptic genre of Revelation and its interpretation.

First we will hear an important text from the third vision.

For my son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. After those years my son the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath. Then the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings.... After seven days... [the] earth shall give up those who are asleep in it.... The Most High shall be revealed on the seat of judgment.... The pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight (7:28-36).

In the fourth vision Ezra encoun-

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<sup>18</sup> Chapters 1-2 are known as Fifth Ezra and Chapters 15-16 are known as Sixth Ezra; both of these are early Christian works from the second century AD.

ters a woman, about whom the revealing angel declares: 'The woman whom you saw is Zion, which you now behold as a city being built' (10:44).

In the fifth vision there is a lion, about which it is said:

And as for the lion... this is the Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days, who will arise from the offspring of David.... (12:31-32).

This theme is continued in the sixth vision in these words:

This is the interpretation of the vision: As for your seeing a man come up from the heart of the sea, this is he whom the Most High has been keeping for many ages, who will himself deliver his creation.... The days are coming when the Most High will deliver those who are on the earth. And bewilderment of mind shall come over those who inhabit the earth. They shall plan to make war against one another, city against city, place against place, people against people, and kingdom against kingdom. When these things take place and the signs occur that I showed you before, then my Son will be revealed... (13:25-32).

Revelation and Fourth Ezra share a common conceptual, symbolic world, which we know as apocalyptic literature. It uses these language forms, metaphors and symbols to speak of that which transcends human experience and which addresses human suffering and God's ultimate deliverance of God's people. Apocalyptic language would have been understood as addressing one's own situation with what we could call 'true reality', but in metaphorical and symbolic language which would have been understood to be just that. One might even say that it is only with metaphorical, symbolic, apocalyptic language that

one is able to address the realities of the cosmic struggle and God's eschatological deliverance of the faithful.

(3) Revelation is almost certainly to be understood as a dramatic presentation of the cosmic conflict between God and Satan, between the faithful followers of the Lamb and the evils of the first century Roman context that threatened faithfulness. Such a drama should not be understood as a linear presentation of one sequence of events, but rather as a series of repeated presentations of the conflict. In this sense, Revelation is characterized by recapitulation, in which there is repetition of the conflict and the resolution of final salvation. The interpretive principle of recapitulation goes back to Victorinus of Pettau, a bishop who was martyred about AD 300. Although he did not explicitly discuss such an interpretive principle *per se*, he implicitly used it as a primary framework of interpretation for Revelation; he wrote: 'Order is not to be looked for in the Apocalypse[; understanding] is to be looked for.'<sup>19</sup>

What is clear in a careful study of Revelation is that the final consummation of God's salvation of the faithful is presented many times. It is described in the context of the worship of the Lamb and the presentation of the scroll (5:1-14). It is powerfully presented in the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals (7:9-17). It is the content of the seventh trumpet (11:15-19). The 144,000 followers of the Lamb on Mount Zion are presented as repre-

<sup>19</sup> Victorinus, *In Apocalypsin* 8.2, as cited by Wainwright, p. 29; I am dependent upon Wainwright for an understanding of Victorinus.

sentative of this reality (14:1-5). It is briefly presented in the announcement of the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:6-10), and is, of course, described quite fully and finally at the end of the Revelation (21:1-22:5). There is, obviously, only one final salvation/consummation; it is not a repeated event. Revelation repeats the description of this glorious moment, not only because it is important, but because it is part of the apocalyptic style to engage in repetition or recapitulation; it is the dramatic character of such literature.

(4) The last major perspective for sound interpretation is, perhaps, the most difficult to explain and to comprehend. I would contend that the situation of John and his churches in the late first century Roman Empire is superimposed, as it were, upon the portrayal of the ultimate conflict between God and Satan, involving the fall of Satan and his Beasts and the victory of God, Jesus Christ and the faithful witnesses [= the believers]. Sometimes the line between the present situation of the author-recipients and the ultimate, cosmic future is rather thin; in this type of apocalyptic presentation the readers' experience and the reality of the ultimate end are one and the same—and yet clearly distinct. Imagine one of those books in which there are clear plastic sheets which overlay one another in a presentation of the human body or a geographical region. As each sheet is turned, one moves, with the human body, from the muscle structure to the skeletal frame, to vessels and arteries and to the various organs. Or, with a geographical region, one sees

first the political boundaries, then the rivers and vegetation and then the elevations. In a similar fashion, Revelation's first sheet is the author and recipient's actual cultural, social, political and historical first century AD setting and reality. As one turns to the second sheet, one sees the ultimate cosmic conflict between God and Jesus Christ and Satan and his agents. The two sheets are always together, however, so that Revelation is at the same time both a description of the author and recipients' world and also, by means of apocalyptic, metaphorical literature, a real and true, but not literalistic, description of the final conflict and God and Christ's victory and vindication of the faithful disciples. Thus, the realities of the recipients described in the opening letters are set in the context of Jesus Christ's actual, although yet not fully realized status, as 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' (1:5), and of the faithful witnesses' goal to be with the Lord God, their light, and to '... reign forever and ever' (22:5).

These four perspectives for a sound approach to the interpretation of Revelation taken together speak, hopefully with considerable help and clarity, to various interpretive issues noted earlier.

The fundamental issue of whether to read Revelation literally or symbolically is both basically resolved and seen to be an oversimplification or imprecision. Because Revelation is actually addressing the first century AD recipients in and with their issues, because Revelation is apocalyptic literature and because Revelation is recapitulatory in structure,

Revelation is not to be read or understood as a literalistic, chronological cryptogram of some alleged, final future moment of human history, unknown to the original author and recipients but known only to some self-appointed interpreter who has at some later time unlocked the meaning of Revelation. Church history has shown so clearly, and sadly, that in the hands of such privileged interpreters these precise predictions of a particular set of human events, often creating an unhealthy sense of fear and terror, have—at least to date—always been wrong. That is a sobering and instructive interpretive reality.

It is not simply that Revelation is symbolic but not literal; that would be imprecise and oversimplified. Revelation presents some things literally, but describes most matters in symbolic or metaphorical terms. But these metaphorical presentations are about actual issues and speak God's truth about events and commitments. In fact, most of the metaphors in Revelation are explained. Note the careful identification of all symbols and metaphors in the initial vision of Jesus Christ (1:9-20). The white robes of the faithful are their righteous deeds (19:8). Even the gloriously described New Jerusalem is not a literal city with pearly gates and golden streets; it is clearly identified as the Church: "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God' (21:9-10). In

effect, this is the apocalyptic, metaphorical description of what in Ephesians is described more simply, although even there with metaphor: '... to present the church to himself [Christ] in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish' (Ephesians 5:27). In Revelation the message is presented in metaphors, but the metaphors, although vehicles of power, themselves are not the message; the message is the truth or reality to which the metaphor refers.

Of course, not all of the symbols of Revelation are clearly identified. Apart from the explicit identifications, some symbols are nearly or virtually identified. An excellent example of this is the great whore of Revelation 17. She is Babylon (17:5), drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6), sits on seven mountains (17:9) and is specifically called 'the great city that rules over the kings of the earth' (17:18). This means it is Rome; there really is no reasonable alternative interpretation. Yet, some symbols remain a mystery. In the same section (Revelation 17) the ten horns who are ten kings (17:12) are impossible to identify, although contextually they must be some group of vassal kings within the power and reach of the Roman Empire. The few symbols in Revelation that cannot be identified or understood with any real clarity in their first century AD contexts never, in fact, erode or prohibit a sound and responsible interpretation of Revelation as a whole; there is always enough that is clear on which to base a sound inter-

pretation.

Within all of these perspectives it is possible to address briefly the contemporary concerns over the alleged undue violence and vilification in Revelation and its presumed male centredness which is negative in its presentation of women.

The language of vilification and violence was part and parcel of apocalyptic literature in the Second Temple Jewish period; it is part of the rhetoric and metaphor of such literary language and style. Further, this language is used in Revelation in the interests of God's vindication of faithful witnesses who have followed the Lamb at the cost of actual exclusion, suffering and even persecution. When later readers of Revelation, especially those in positions of power and privilege in the world, use these metaphors with any degree of literalism, it does become a kind of triumphalism that betrays the character of the gospel. Theologically, in the purposes of Revelation, these metaphors are meant to express the righteousness and justice of God and God's care for those who faithfully follow the Lamb and worship the Lamb and God. Evil has no place within the righteousness and justice of God and God's eternal rule.<sup>20</sup>

The so-called radical feminist cri-

tique of Revelation is built on data within Revelation that traditional and male-oriented interpreters have often ignored or glossed over. Some of the images of women and of sexuality in Revelation are reflective of the generally androcentric and even misogynistic character of much of the Greco-Roman culture with respect to women. Yet, Revelation is not theologically teaching a repressive or negative view of women or sexuality; again, the metaphorical language, combined here with some cultural assumptions, have shaped certain images in Revelation. Again, the metaphor should not be taken as the message.

It is possible to construct a positive feminist hermeneutic for Revelation. One excellent example of this is Barbara R. Rossing's 1999 book, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*.<sup>21</sup> Rossing thoroughly and strategically demonstrates that the use of two women, one good and one evil, to present one's choice in the world was a feature of a long tradition of moral literature both in the Jewish and Greco-Roman wisdom traditions, which in Judaism was often intertwined with the apocalyptic tradition. Through careful analysis Rossing establishes that Revelation uses these images, although feminine, not to promote gendered choices, but to give alternative communal visions that are, in fact, political: the injustice of this world over-

<sup>20</sup> For a much more thorough and excellent discussion of these issues, see, for one example, David Lertis Matson, "'Outside Are the Dogs': Interpreting Revelation's Hate Language", *Leaven* 8:1 (2000), pp. 40-47; see also Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwynter, "'Vengeance Is Mine!' Says the Lord: Revelation's Language of Violence and the Practice of a Discipleship of Nonviolence", Chapter 5 in *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (The Bible & Liberation Series; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harvard Theological Studies 48; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999).

ruled by the justice of God's world.<sup>22</sup>

### **Six Suggestions For Reading and Applying Revelation**

I come now to my six suggestions for reading and hermeneutically applying Revelation as the Word of God in our own contemporary situations. These grow out of all that has been said already about the occasion, purpose, and theology of Revelation and interpretive perspectives for Revelation. These hermeneutical suggestions are meant also to speak to that persistent attempt in the history of the church, still present in our own times, to read Revelation primarily as a cryptic guide to the precise events of the end-time, always assumed to be within the lifetime of the interpreter or his or her circle of influence.

(1) Revelation should be understood within the historical and literary contexts of its author and original recipients. This is the foundation and basis for all other understandings. This is a simple affirmation, but its importance and value cannot be overemphasized.

(2) The theological commitments of Revelation should never be lost or minimized or marginalized; they are always valid and true for the people of God: God vindicates the people of God in and through conflict; thus, the people of God should remain faithful and receive God's salvation. The call to discipleship within Revelation is crucial. Although not developed here, I regret to say, the emphasis on the worship of God and

the Lamb in Revelation, who receive in fact parallel and equal worship, should be emphasized in the context of discipleship. Revelation is replete with hymns that are powerful and deep—4:8, 11; 5:9-14; 7:10-12; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; and 19:1-8 are among the texts that deserve special and careful attention in this regard.<sup>23</sup>

(3) Any conflict anywhere and at anytime which tests and challenges the church and believers can and should be read against the historical and theological grid of Revelation. Revelation can give meaning to such experiences faced throughout history by the faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ. One of the problems of much of western, North Atlantic, English-speaking male-oriented interpretation of Revelation in the last one to two hundred years is that it has occurred in contexts in which the interpreter has been situated in a reasonably privileged place, relatively free from suffering, conflict and a sense that one's faith is deeply threatened by the surrounding culture. Given such contexts, it might be more difficult for the interpreter to enter genuinely into the apocalyptic and metaphorical framework of Revelation and thus use it as an appropriate grid for understanding one's situation. I have on occasion even suggested that it is only the comfortable interpreter who has the time and leisure to read Revelation as a cryptogrammic map of the future

<sup>22</sup> See especially Rossing, pp. 161-65.

<sup>23</sup> Among many good articles on this subject, see the fine one by Marianne Meye Thompson, 'Worship in the Book of Revelation', *Ex Auditu* 8 (1992), pp. 45-54.

rather than as a metaphorically powerful drama of the conflict of being a faithful disciple awaiting the glorious vindication and salvation of God and the Lamb!

(4) But, the historical and theological grid of Revelation is neither a guide, chart or cryptogram to the unfolding of human history nor a presentation of the literal and/or chronological details of the 'end time(s)' of human history. That was never its purpose in terms of its original setting, its occasion, its form or its message to the seven churches of Asia. To use Revelation in this way has, as indicated, proved in the history of the church to be mistaken; it is an irresponsible approach and constitutes an abuse of the Apocalypse.

(5) Revelation is a constant message of hope and call to discipleship for the church, which is—from the apocalyptic perspective of John—always in a situation of crisis, persecution and pressure to compromise the gospel. Revelation should be read, studied, preached and taught with this perspective clearly in view.

(6) To the extent and degree that Revelation speaks of the actual climax of human history and the inauguration of the final judgment, salvation and the eternal union of the Bride and the Lamb, which it does, it is speaking beyond John's knowledge and that of his original hearers and readers. Apart from the certainty of this climactic victory of God, it is also speaking beyond our understanding as well.

Thus, it would be arrogant and hermeneutically dishonest to think that we know or could know this sec-

ond level of meaning before the fact. As was and is the case with the incarnation, death, resurrection and messianic fulfilment of Jesus, these events were a/the hermeneutical key to the Old Testament *only after the fact* and not before the fulfilment of the promises in events later understood. To speculate, if in the eternal presence of God we discover that some parts or details of Revelation were literal indications of some end-time events, so be it; that possibility is no warrant now for anyone's irresponsible or arrogant attempt to misuse Revelation with speculative interpretations that violate sound interpretive and hermeneutical principles.

### Closing

So, my final word is this: embrace Revelation as a call to discipleship and worship in the midst of life and culture which always threaten to erode true witness to the Lamb. Never let the abuses and misuse of Revelation cause neglect or avoidance of it. Confess strongly that 'the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever,' (11:15), embracing the certain hope that '... his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever' (22:3-5).