



The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Rev 7:17

The Lamb and the Beasts

In order to understand the book of Revelation, it seems best to imagine the original context in which it was read and heard. We envision ourselves in the city of Ephesus, the capital of the seven cities to which the book was written. In the evening of the first day of the week, “the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10), the Christians assemble in one of the houses of the city to celebrate their weekly Eucharist. They gather to pray, to sing psalms and hymns, to hear the Jewish Scriptures and the new Christian writings, and to share the bread of life and the cup of the new covenant.

As the assembly listens to the new writing of John from the island of Patmos, they are taken on an imaginative journey. Its mystical language evokes wondrous images of Christ: as a luminous being with a long robe and flaming eyes, a triumphant Lamb at the throne of God, and a conquering hero on a white horse whose only weapon is the word of God. The inspired words of John’s visions transport the listeners to the throne of the Lamb to worship with all the creatures of heaven who sing songs of triumph and praise. The visions also confront the listener with repulsive images of the violence and injustice that challenge them within the Roman world of the first century. The terrifying images of evil and deception express the insecurity

and peril they feel as they face the backbreaking labor, economic anxiety, and intimidating threats of their daily lives.

The purpose of Revelation's visionary journey is to exhort its listeners to faithfulness and to offer them hope. It lays out contrasting visions of the world: the world of the Lamb and the world of the beasts. The central message is this: the Lamb has already conquered the beasts. Our ultimate victory is assured if we choose the Lamb over the beasts and follow in the way of sacrificial, redemptive love. The magnitude of our choice between the Lamb and the beasts is expressed through the inspired imagery of the book. In a sense, we are momentarily given the eyes of God—the eyes to glimpse the heavenly meaning of our worship, to look evil in the face and see its full reality, to gaze upon the cosmic meaning of Christ's sacrifice and victory over sin and death, and to envision the world renewed by the hope for God's kingdom.

Though Revelation is filled with frightening and grotesque images, it is not a book written to instill fear or terror in its listeners. It is a wakeup call, written to increase a sense of urgency for our world. The hope that Revelation offers is not an easy comfort, a passive waiting, or a trouble-free escape. It is a hope that knows the terrors of the world and can still testify to God's absolute love and a promising future. After seeing the deeper realities of creation with God's eyes—where all creation worships around God's throne, where the new Jerusalem is entered through open gates for people of all nations, where all are refreshed by the river of the water of life, and where the tree of life offers healing leaves and nourishing fruit—then we can see all of life more richly and dearly. Revelation gives us the imagination to see the whole world with sacramental vision, to know that God dwells at the heart of creation, and to understand that Christ truly reigns over the world and its future. Once we have glimpsed the world in this way, then the hope that we are given inspires us to commit ourselves to the values of Christ, to work for a more peaceful world, to labor for the healing and reconciliation of people, and to see everyone around us as sacred and beloved of God.

Revelation does not literally predict future events. The warnings given by biblical prophets are always offered for the purpose of conversion; they are offered in order to change God's people. When Jonah went through the city proclaiming God's prophetic word, "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown," God's threatening word was designed to bring the people to repentance. And when the city turned from its evil ways, God did not inflict

replied, “God himself will provide the lamb” (Gen 22:8). All of salvation history is really a waiting for the Lamb that God would give to his people. In the story of Exodus, the Israelites sacrificed the Passover lamb on the night of their liberation. The blood of the lamb on their doorposts freed them from the final destructive plague so they could journey to the land promised to them.

In explaining the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice, the early Christians looked to the Scriptures of Israel. Isaiah had described the Suffering Servant, a figure who suffered vicariously for God’s people, as afflicted and wounded, “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7). John’s gospel sums up the ancient sacrificial images of the Old Testament when he calls Jesus “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29, 36); and Paul uses the same imagery when he calls Jesus the “paschal lamb” who has been sacrificed (1 Cor 5:7). “The Lamb” appears twenty-eight times in the book of Revelation, always as a rich verbal icon of Christ. The Lamb is triumphant, but bearing the marks of his sacrifice, “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (5:6). He is given honor and glory by the angels and saints of heaven, and he is followed by the 144,000, whose robes have been washed white in his blood (7:14; 14:4). He conquers the beasts who make war on him (17:14) and his victory is celebrated in the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7–9).

In opposition to the richly developed image of the Lamb, biblical literature borrows from the mythological literature of the ancient Near East to express the reality of chaos and evil in the symbolic form of beasts. In the Old Testament these primordial beasts represent the powers that threaten God’s people. In the book of Job, Leviathan is the repulsive serpent in the sea and Behemoth is an oxlike beast on the earth (Job 40:15–41:34). Throughout the Scriptures of Israel, beasts represent the powers of Israel’s enemies, especially the might of Egypt and Babylon. In the visions of Daniel, the great empires of the world and their rulers are depicted as grotesque and ferocious beasts that make war on the people of the earth (Dan 7).

In Revelation, “beast” is used 39 times to refer to the enemies of God’s people. The ultimate figure of evil is the fiery red dragon, with seven heads, ten horns, and a destructive tail. The beast that arises from the sea combines all the characteristics of the four beasts in Daniel’s vision, thus representing all the political powers that oppress and dehumanize. It receives its authority from the dragon and the whole world worships it. The beast that arises from the land is deceptive, possessing horns like the lamb and speaking like the

dragon. It is called the “false prophet” and causes the earth’s inhabitants to worship the beast from the sea. The mark of this beast, the number 666, is a distorted imitation of the protective seal placed on the foreheads of God’s people. The dragon and its two allied beasts form what some authors have called “a counterfeit trinity.” The dragon, the source of all evil, is an anti-God. The first beast, which receives its authority from the dragon, is an anti-Christ. The second beast, which promotes the worship of the anti-Christ beast through trickery, is an anti-Spirit.

Like the Israelites renewing the covenant in the promised land were commanded, “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh 24:15), the people of the earth must choose between the Lamb and the beasts. There can be no peaceful coexistence between the worshipers of the satanic dragon and his beastly allies on the one hand and those worshipping God and the Lamb on the other. “Choose this day whom you will serve” is the imperative of the book of Revelation. Counterfeit trinities continue to draw people today to offer their allegiance to movements, desires, and experiences that distort God’s will for individuals and for his world. The reign of darkness continues to oppose the kingdom of God. Most importantly, however, for this last book of the Bible, we must know that the Lamb has conquered the beasts. Not only does Revelation proclaim that Christ conquers the empires and global powers that tyrannize and oppress people; he also conquers evil itself and casts it forever into the fiery pit of destruction. The consequence of our choice for the Lamb is nothing less than a share in God’s newly created and perfected world.

Reflection and discussion

- Why are institutionalized evil and structural sin depicted as powerful, grotesque beasts in this book?

- Why is Christ depicted as a Lamb throughout this book? How can a gentle Lamb conquer the overwhelming beasts of this world and the underworld?

Retelling the History of Salvation

The book of Revelation can be understood as a retelling of the Bible's principle events of salvation. Choosing the richly symbolic form of apocalyptic literature, the author recaps the two primary events of the Bible: the Exodus of the Old Testament and the Paschal Mystery of the New Testament. Through vivid imagery drawn from both testaments, the author links the contemporary lives of Christians with God's liberation of the Israelites from Egypt and the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Revelation unfolds the Exodus story in a new way. The fact that imagery from the Exodus fills the visions of Revelation helps us comprehend the terrible plagues of disasters and death. The seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls echo and intensify the plagues brought against Pharaoh in the Exodus. Hearing the cry of his suffering people, God threatened Egypt with a series of afflictions as part of his overall goal of liberating his people from injustice. The plagues serve for the conversion of the oppressor and the liberation of God's people. The purpose of the threatened tribulations that fill Revelation is to bring about repentance, not to inflict cruelty. The dreadful series of plagues are not a coded script of what is to come in the future, but a frightening warning to bring us to repentance and to wake us up. They exhort us to choose God's vision of life rather than the terrible but inevitable consequences of violent oppression.

The people of God continue to experience a new Exodus throughout history. In the first century, the Christians addressed in John's visions were threatened by the agonies of the beasts, the violent oppression of the Roman empire. Jesus is both the new Moses, leading his people to new life, and the Passover Lamb, the sacrificial victim whose blood was shed for their liberation. The

song of Moses, the victory hymn sung by the Israelites after they crossed the sea into freedom, has become in Revelation the song of the Lamb, sung in praise of God's deliverance after the conquest of the beasts (15:3).

Revelation is, above all, a retelling of the story of Jesus' death and resurrection using new images. It is about the heart of the gospel, but told in a new way, through the daring form of apocalyptic literature. It expresses the cosmic significance of the Paschal mystery of Christ's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection, presenting it as a fundamental battle between the forces of good and evil. It is about the struggle of Jesus with the evil powers of this world, their unremitting destruction of him, and his ultimate vindication. The heavenly human being of chapter 1, the slain-yet-standing Lamb of chapter 5, the newborn son of the heavenly woman of chapter 12, and the triumphant rider on the white horse of chapter 19 are all the same person, the crucified and glorified Christ. There is no chronological sequence for these images; they are multiple ways of expressing the meaning of Christ's saving victory in apocalyptic form.

The salvation achieved through the exodus of Israel from slavery and the death and resurrection of Christ is already experienced by people on earth, but the full saving effects of God's victory are not yet fully manifested in the world. In the present time, we are living in the period of tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Revelation lifts the veil that covers our eyes so that we can see the full significance of our salvation. It gives us glimpses, through highly symbolic language, of the full effects of liberation on God's people and the risen life that Christ has won for us.

Reflection and discussion

- In what way is the death and resurrection of Jesus a new exodus for those who follow him?

- How do I experience the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of God’s salvation?

Word, Worship, and Witness

The Word of God. In order to understand the word of God within the words of Revelation, we must realize that its language is symbolic. Symbols allow us to express what cannot be completely expressed in straightforward speech. Our most cherished convictions find their expression in symbolic images and actions. Think of the cross, the flag, your ring. Symbols affect us at a level deeper than intellectual understanding. They do not simply communicate information; they take hold of us and elicit powerful emotions and convictions.

Revelation is not a code book; it is a symphony of images. It is important that we read it with our imaginations engaged. Attempts to express images and symbols in logical, factual language rob them of their rich meaning and power of persuasion. Revelation should be approached more like a work of art than a mathematical problem. Interpreting symbolic language is less a rational act than an act of the imagination. We can gain hints at the meaning of the book’s many symbolic numbers, colors, places, and creatures by understanding the meaning of similar symbolism in other parts of the Bible and other first-century Jewish and Christian literature. While there are plenty of authors today who want to tell us what Revelation “really” means, we can never express the full meaning of its imagery in conceptual language, nor should we ever try.

Though Revelation was probably not the last book of the Bible written, it is appropriate that the book was chosen by the church to be the last book of the Bible. As the Bible begins with God’s creation in the book of Genesis, it ends with God’s new creation in Revelation. The work demonstrates that Jesus Christ is the summit of salvation history. As the book proclaims, he is “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (22:13). Christ is the originator of the universe—through him all things were

made; and he is the goal of the universe—through him all things are fulfilled. More than any other book of the New Testament, this work is filled with words, images, and symbols that have their roots in the Old Testament, but it expresses them in a whole new way. In Christ, what God has been doing throughout history comes to its climactic completion.

From Word to Worship. Revelation expresses the dynamic interaction between word and worship, a relationship in which the worship enacts the word and the word explains the worship. Worship is a large part of the content and message of Revelation as well as its context. It is the central act both in heaven and on earth. John describes his visionary experience: “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (1:10), probably meaning that he was worshiping the Lord on Sunday. As he worships he experiences his visions, and what he envisions, at all the key moments throughout his book, is essentially worship. The liturgical images and acts that pervade the book are provided by both the emerging tradition of Christian eucharistic worship in the first century and the ancient tradition of Israelite temple liturgy.

The immediate context in which the visionary message of John was heard by the Christian assembly was the Sunday Eucharist. In the sacred space of worship, heaven and earth connect. In sacred time, the past, present, and future merge. The eucharistic assembly is, at the same time, a present experience of Christian worship, a re-enactment of the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, and an anticipation of the messianic banquet at the end of time. In the context of worship, we can assemble in the sacred space of the Eucharist, gather with John on the island of Patmos, and stand before the throne to worship God in heaven.

Worship transcends time, as it brings the past and the future into the present moment. “The Lord’s day,” in the context of worship, is simultaneously the present day on which the Christians assemble, the first Easter on which Christ rose from the dead, and that future “day of the Lord,” the coming day of justice of which the prophets spoke. The reading of Revelation in the context of worship enables the listener to experience the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:8). Jesus came to them in the past in his saving death and resurrection; he comes to them in the inspired words of John and in the Eucharist they share; and Jesus will come to them for the complete manifestation of his reign. The liturgical acclamation of the Christian assembly, “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20), is a prayer for the present moment as well as for the ultimate future, all within the timeless moment of worship.

Reading the Book of Revelation

Let us place ourselves in the lamp-lit darkness as Christians gather to worship. As we listen to the words of God's prophet John, we are taken on a visionary journey with him. In another level of existence, we meet the risen Christ, participate in the heavenly liturgy before God's throne, witness the attack of the ancient dragon, and are shown the true meaning of Christ's conquest through his saving death. The experience transforms our self-identity. We are engaged as participants in the battle of Christ against the beasts. We are changed from victims of oppressive circumstances to victors with Christ over the ultimate forces of evil. As we prepare to experience the Eucharist, we hear the voice of Jesus himself saying, "See, I am coming soon" (22:12, 20). Gathered around the Lord's table, we experience the coming of Jesus, a coming already made known from the past, a coming anticipated in the future, and a coming that is known in the present—charging our lives with cosmic significance and forming us into faithful witnesses and victors.

Reading great literature demands nearly as much imagination from the reader as creating it demands of the author. As you begin to study this work, forget what you have heard in the past about the book of Revelation. Realize that the work does not give predictions about future events; much less does it offer a timetable for the end of the world. Free your imagination from the chains of literalism. Imagine yourself listening among the assembled Christians, hearing this work for the first time. Read it aloud, so that you can truly hear the words and the visions may come to life in your imagination. You will feel the difference.

Prayer

Lamb of God, who frees us from sin by your own blood, have mercy on us. You are worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. During this study, teach me to follow you and to be your faithful witness. Protect me from the powers of evil and show me how to make my life a testimony to your love and truth. Guide, encourage, and enlighten me as I read and contemplate your inspired word.