

Introduction

Reading Revelation

This book is written by two authors who *care* about the meaning of Revelation. It is an attempt to take seriously the challenge of apocalyptic literature, from its origins in antiquity to its use and misuse in our own day. Apocalyptic literature has always been an effort to respond to very basic human questions that transcend time and place: How do we live in a world rife with evil? Does God care about our predicament? Will justice finally be found on earth? What happens when we die? These and other questions live in the heart of humanity. The book of Revelation offers powerful, poetic answers to them.

The authors care not only because the questions are important but because we are trying in our own ways from different outposts of empire to live lives faithful to the Crucified and Risen One. This is not now, and has never been, an easy thing to do. We believe that Revelation offers great insight as to how this is both necessary and possible. We also recognize that many sincere Christians have refused to read Revelation or have put it aside for various reasons. This book is an attempt to recover the power of Revelation for our time.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Our book is not a verse-by-verse commentary. Rather, it provides resources that we hope will be helpful for a reading of Revelation faithful both to its original context (“then”) and meaningful today (“now”). One of the limitations of many popular works on Revelation is that they do not sufficiently situate the text within the social and historical context out of which John of Patmos’s visions took place and were written down. Therefore, we have explored both the roots and branches of apocalyptic literature generally, as well as the specific setting of Revelation within the Roman Empire of the first century C.E. With this background in mind, we proceed to address Revelation thematically, attempting to respond to what seem to be the central concerns both of the text itself and of intelligent, faithful readers in our time. This book, therefore, is not the definitive work on Revelation, but, we hope, a step toward recovering its power for today’s Christian readers. We engage the scholarly literature, but are writing not simply

for scholars but for others, like ourselves, who are intrigued by the power of Revelation and are sincerely discerning what its call might be for our lives. As two authors who had not known each other personally before we collaborated on this book, we each came to Revelation with different issues in our hearts and minds. These differences, though, were within the framework of a broader commonality of purpose and vision. From opposite sides of the Pacific we have asked similar questions and been challenged and inspired by similar people, communities, and movements.

I, Anthony (to borrow a phrase from Revelation), am from Australia, having spent most of my life in Sydney and Brisbane, two cities on the Pacific seaboard. For me, the situation in Australia has been somewhat analogous to the situation of the Roman province of Asia for which Revelation was written. While the citizens of Asia looked to the great Roman Empire for security, prosperity, and as a source of culture, in my lifetime Australians have looked toward the United States for these same things. Here our security has been purchased by a military alliance with Washington that has led us to war in Vietnam and Iraq. Economists from Chicago and Harvard tell us that the free market is the panacea for all our ills, and so our economy has been privatized and globalized, with benefits for some and costs to others. But it is probably the importation of cultural commodities from across the Pacific that epitomizes our relationship with the “great city.” From our earliest days young Australians are inculturated with icons of American culture. We begin by learning our alphabet from *Sesame Street*. We then graduate to Hollywood, McDonald’s, Nike, and Calvin Klein. Nothing of this is imposed upon us. Rather we seek it out; we desire to become part of the “great city.” We believe we will find happiness and satisfaction there. I have long had inklings that Revelation might speak to this situation. My theological education had made it clear that beneath the weird imagery Revelation took a critical stance toward the Roman Empire. My experiences among the homeless and traumatized of our cities shed some light on the harsh realities imposed by empire on so many people. My desire to recover the authentic message of the scriptures for our time compelled me to investigate Revelation and see whether it could live up to its promise.

I, Wes, living in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A., recognize that even the opportunity to study and write this book is a sign of the privileged imperial situation in which I live day to day. I come to Revelation, though, because of a rather indirect acknowledgment of its power among adult participants in Bible study programs I have been presenting in recent years. At the end of each series, I invite people as part of the evaluation process to rate on a scale of 5 (= most) to 1 (= least) which parts of the Bible they might be interested in studying in future programs. Most portions garner scores between 3 and 5, but Revelation is different. There are a few 5s, but also a lot of 1s. But they are 1s with *feeling*: exclamation points, underlines, a large “NO!” written in the margin. This expression of resistance was saying something strong about the power, for better or worse,

that Revelation held in peoples' hearts. Another factor for me is the frequent questioning that comes my way along this line: "My neighbor (friend, coworker, child) says that the book of Revelation says that the end of the world is coming, and that you can tell because . . . What do you think?" My inability to answer these heartfelt questions led me first to study Revelation for myself, then to discover the absence of a resource aimed at helping with this pastoral need among mainstream Christians in our culture. For the past few years, I have been living and breathing in two worlds: that of a middle-class, educated male of privilege in the security of the United States, and that of a follower of Jesus trying to become intimate with some of the wisdom of my ancestors in faith.

We live on opposite shores of the Pacific Ocean, yet long before we knew each other we had already become "blood brothers." On September 17, 1988, Anthony and five friends from the Catholic Worker movement in Australia boarded the USS *New Jersey*, a battleship in the United States Navy, while it was docked on the Brisbane River. Their intention was to unmask the *New Jersey's* long history of bloodshed in Korea, Vietnam, and Lebanon. To this end they poured their blood on the sixteen-inch guns and on the front deck of the battleship and recited prayers to cast out the spirit of evil embodied in the warship. Less than a year later, Wes, as part of a community he was then a member of, called Galilee Circle, boarded this same ship on Hiroshima Day 1989 as it sat in Seattle's Elliott Bay on tour as part of the annual Seafair summer celebration. Wes, along with another, unfurled a banner with a quotation from then Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen: "Our Nuclear War Preparations Are the Global Crucifixion of Jesus," while others poured blood and ashes on the same sixteen-inch guns and a display of Marine paraphernalia. Both Anthony's and Wes's actions were part of our ongoing commitment to the biblical call to witness both *against* the forces of death that beckon and seduce us and *for* the life-giving way of Jesus that conquers death by accepting violence rather than inflicting it. Our reading of Revelation flows out of and deepens this commitment to nonviolent public witness as part of the task of faithful discipleship.

We believe that our reading of Revelation has something new to offer people concerned with the meaning of the Bible in their lives and in their world. We have not only engaged the scholarly, "objective" work on Revelation but have also been inspired by the writings of people such as William Stringfellow and Daniel Berrigan, whose revelations about Revelation have engaged their lives and ours. These aspects of who we are and what resources we have used have led us to depart in important ways from prevailing interpretations of Revelation.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT OUR APPROACH?

For most of its history of interpretation, Revelation was thought to have been written in a time when the churches were suffering a great persecution. Revelation, it was believed, was written to help the followers of Jesus maintain their

faith amid distress, with the promise that the imminence of the End would bring to a close their great tribulation. This traditional view does not fit with the emerging consensus among historians that finds no evidence for a widespread or systematic persecution of Christians in first-century provincial Asia. Rather, the evidence of both historical documents and the text of Revelation itself suggests that it was seduction by the Roman Empire from within a context of relative comfort, rather than a terrifying persecution, that more accurately describes the situation of the original audience of the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation was addressed to a circle of seven discipleship communities—which we will refer to throughout this book by the Greek term, *ekklēsia*¹—in the Roman province of Asia. The usual word offered by translators, “churches,” suggests much more structure and organization than was present in the first-century discipleship groups. The alternative, “community,” has been so abused in our time by its reference to such markedly noncommunal groupings as “the international community,” the “business community,” and so forth, that we find its use problematic.

Richard Horsley explains:

While *ekklēsia* came . . . from the Septuagint (the Jewish Bible in Greek) with strong connotations of the “assembly” of (all) Israel, its primary meaning in the Greek-speaking eastern Roman Empire was the citizen “assembly” of the Greek *polis*. *Ekklēsia* is thus a political term with certain religious overtones.²

The Hellenistic cities of the eastern empire all had *ekklēsia*, or citizens’ assemblies. The assemblies engaged in civic planning, cultic ritual, and the discussion of issues of concern to the urban citizenry. In our culture the *ekklēsia* might be labeled a “Town Hall” meeting. The followers of Jesus originally set themselves up as an alternative citizens’ assembly. Yet the apparent attractiveness of empire began to entice some members of the *ekklēsia* back into Rome’s orbit.

That the members of the *ekklēsia* were increasingly attracted to the ways of empire constituted for the author of Revelation (who names himself as John) a grave crisis. What could be more natural than this: that a tiny group of people—say between fifty and one hundred among a population of two hundred thousand in the huge cosmopolitan city of Ephesus—would experience the pressure of going along with the ways of empire just to get by in daily life? For those who were sorely tempted to make their peace with Rome, Revelation unveiled the truth about empire. It revealed empire as both a seductive whore who offered the good life in exchange for obedience and a ravenous beast that devoured any who would dare oppose it. The situation where seduction, rather than the fear of per-

1. Throughout this book we use the Greek singular *ekklēsia* to refer to individual assemblies in particular cities and the plural *ekklēsiai* to refer to the collection of assemblies addressed in Revelation.

2. Horsley (1997), p. 208.

secution, consumed the followers of Jesus also accurately describes the situation of First World followers of Jesus today.

Rather than reading Revelation as written about the End—an issue that the passing of time would render more and more irrelevant to the people of the first-century Roman Empire—we read Revelation as written to address what John believed to be the pastoral situation of the seven *ekklēsiai* in their own time and place. As the individual character of the messages to each *ekklēsia* (Rev. 2-3) makes abundantly clear, the followers of Jesus in each city had different challenges to meet in their relationship with the “great city.” The majority of the *ekklēsiai* were guilty of collusion with Rome. Only two, the *ekklēsiai* of Smyrna and Philadelphia, did not need to “repent.” Their task was to persevere in their resistance to empire and to embrace God’s alternative way, to which they were obviously already committed. As for the other five *ekklēsiai*, their task was to renew their commitments to Jesus and each other so as to “come out” of empire. Such a “coming out” can never be a completed task. Rather, the members of the *ekklēsiai* were called to embrace daily the way of God—all the while surrounded by the attractions and threats of empire.

Revelation is a call to have faith in God rather than empire. This call takes place in a narrative through which John tells of his visionary experiences. While many interpreters read each set of visions as recapitulating a single theme, we read these series of visions as containing a “plot.” This plot is the story of YHWH’s³ plan for the people of YHWH⁴ who live in a world dominated by concentrations of human power. The biblical Story tells of a people called to be “set apart” from the power arrangements that characterized Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. This Story is retold in the visions of Revelation. Revelation shows how in earlier days YHWH had issued stern warnings of disaster to those who lived in opposition to YHWH’s covenant with humanity, so that they might repent and embrace the way of YHWH alone. In his visionary experience, however, John saw that YHWH, through Jesus, had activated a new plan. Threats usually did not succeed in bringing people to repentance. Therefore, rather than continue to make prophetic threats to call people to faithfulness, Jesus offered his life in nonviolent witness to the way of God as a new means of leading people to repentance. The raising of Jesus from death was God’s vindication of this new plan. The followers of Jesus in the cities of Roman Asia were themselves called to continue the nonviolent witness practiced by Jesus. This is how the disciples of Jesus were to live in the midst of empire.

We interpret this “plot” as a deliberate rewriting of the biblical Story. As such, Revelation brings forward and completes the entire biblical tradition. This is not

3. Throughout the book, we use the transliteration of the original Hebrew name for God (YHWH) rather than the vocalized “Yahweh” or the generic “Lord” in order to preserve the sense of power and mystery attached to the divine name, a theme central to Revelation.

4. We find ourselves compelled to use sometimes awkward circumlocutions such as the one contained in this sentence in order to avoid gender-specific language for God.

to say that John deliberately wrote Revelation as the last book of the Bible—the biblical canon as we have it did not exist in John’s day. Nor is it meant as a counterpoint to Genesis: the beginning of creation and the destruction of creation. Rather, in weaving the language and imagery of the Hebrew scriptures into his book, John consciously appropriated the biblical style and saw himself as writing with biblical authority. John had a profound knowledge and grasp of the Hebrew scriptures. It is as if John had eaten the scroll of the scriptures himself (cf. Rev. 10:9-11) and had creatively re-presented them on the pages of his book.

The strategy we have adopted in reading Revelation is simple. We have attempted to take seriously the fact that Revelation is a carefully crafted literary composition within the genre of apocalyptic literature. We believe that the text was not written with esoteric intent but was intended to engender real changes in the daily lives of the members of the Asian *ekklēsiai* in their relationship with the Roman Empire. We have endeavored to discover the implications of how Revelation both reflects and critiques the social world in and for which it was produced. In this we have tried to avoid the two “either/or” interpretive pitfalls that have often characterized recent biblical interpretation. One is the belief that written texts are valuable only for the light they shed on the historical world that produced them. The opposing belief is that written texts are wholly independent of the social world of their origins. These have been labeled the “historical-critical” and “literary-critical” methods of interpretation, respectively. We instead use both the available social/historical information about the Roman Empire of early Christianity and the narrative signals provided within the text of Revelation itself to come to grips with what the text is trying to convey. Although the linguistic style of Revelation may seem strange to modern readers familiar perhaps only with the Gospels and epistles among biblical texts, we will show how much of its imagery and form arises from the treasure trove of the more than five-hundred-year-old apocalyptic tradition received and creatively engaged by John. Thus, we seek to be attentive both to the *context* in which John wrote and to the *way* in which he wrote.

Despite the spiritualized and politically disengaged interpretations of scripture that have become the norm in our churches, seminaries, and Bible study groups, it is clear to us that Revelation, like all the other biblical texts, was involved in a pitched battle over issues of spirit such as economics and politics. What was and remains at stake in the biblical texts was and is what it means to live life in accord with the way of YHWH alone. The divine pretensions of pharaohs, kings, and emperors were and are nothing more than a parody of the true sovereignty of YHWH. Because Revelation took seriously the world of the Roman Empire—and declared it a blasphemous caricature of God’s sovereignty over the world—we can take our own world no less seriously. Revelation spared nothing in its critique of empire. In being faithful to John and his vision, we must submit our own world to the same no-holds-barred critique. Revelation does not lend itself to neutrality. The passion with which Revelation was so obviously written typically repulses or engages readers. We have both found ourselves challenged by this obscure book and felt the call to sharpen and deepen our practice

of discipleship. Our reading of Revelation has left us with an awareness of how deeply we are mired in Babylon, but it has also left us more keenly seeking New Jerusalem.

In many ways Revelation is a bizarre book. Its lurid and violent imagery renders the book almost opaque to us who are steeped in Western modes of discourse. For a variety of reasons most of us have neglected or refused to pick up the book, let alone familiarize ourselves with its contents. Because of this unfamiliarity with the text, we urge you to read carefully the text of Revelation itself before, during, and after your study of our book. We attempt to provide *an* interpretation of Revelation, but in no way can it substitute for your own reading of the primary document. Perhaps the best encouragement to pick up the text directly is contained in the opening words of Revelation: “Blessed the one reading these words of prophecy” (1:3).

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

As an aid to your reading of the book of Revelation, we present here an outline of the text. This is not *the* outline but simply one of many possible road maps to help lead you through the intertwined series of visions and metaphorical images that make up the text. We assure you that Revelation is not the work of a deranged mind, but is a carefully crafted work of literary art, whose depth and subtlety we are just beginning fully to appreciate.

- 1:1-8 Prologue/Greeting
- 1:9-3:22 Messages to the Seven *Ekklēsiai* in Asia
 - 1:9-20 Introduction to the Messages
 - 2:1-3:22 Prophetic Messages to the *Ekklēsiai* in Asia (each with same structure):
 - Command to write:
 - Address to angel of the *ekklēsia* by name
 - Title(s) for Jesus
 - What Jesus “knows”
 - Name of opponent
 - Threat against opponent
 - “Hear what the spirit says”
 - Reward for those conquering
- 4:1-5:14 Vision of the Heavenly Court, the Sealed Scroll, and the Lamb
 - The heavenly liturgies, 4:8-11; 5:8-14*
 - The opening of the scroll leads to the next vision . . .
- 6:1-8:1 Vision of Empire and the Cry for Justice—The Seven Seals Are Opened

Four contain the horses/riders of empire
Fifth contains the cry of those executed by empire
Sixth unveils the heavens

The heavenly liturgy, 7:9-17

The seventh seal leads to the next vision . . .

- 8:2-11:19 Vision of YHWH's Plan for Repentance—Seven Trumpets and a Second Scroll

The "old plan": heralded by trumpets that sound warnings to repent or else

The "new plan": announced in the second scroll as nonviolent witness and resurrection

The heavenly liturgy, 11:15-18

The seventh trumpet leads to the next vision . . .

- 12:1-14:20 Vision of the Woman, the Dragon, the Two Beasts, and the Seven Messages

The woman gives birth; war begins in heaven

The war continues on earth led by the two beasts of empire

The earthly liturgy of empire, ch. 13.

The heavenly liturgy, 14:1-5

14:1-20 The Seven Angels with Seven Messages

- 15:1-16:21 Vision of Judgment—The Seven Angels with the Seven Bowls

The heavenly liturgy, 15:2-4

The apocalyptic judgment of evil

- 17:1-22:9 The Vision of the Two Cities

17:1-19:10 The Vision of Babylon as Fallen

The heavenly liturgy, 19:1-8

19:11-20:15 The Vision of Judgment and Victory

21:1-22:9 The Vision of New Jerusalem

- 22:9-21 Epilogue

REVELATION'S AUTHOR

Unlike other apocalyptic texts, Revelation does not claim to have been written by a revered figure from the past, such as Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Daniel, or Ezra. Rather, Revelation presents itself as written by a contemporary of the Asian *ekklēsiai*, a fellow traveler, someone who shared the distress, the empire, and the endurance of the followers of Jesus in the cities of Asia (1:9). Revelation is John's attempt to convey in words the visions that had seized his entire being on the island of Patmos, fifty miles across the Aegean Sea from the city of Ephesus.

There is general, but not universal, scholarly agreement that John's presence on the island was the result of social sanctions imposed on him by imperial authorities. This is the meaning of John's statement that he was on Patmos "on account of the word of God and my witness to Jesus" (1:9).⁵ Yet if John experienced imperial sanctions for his public witnessing to Jesus, why was he still alive to tell the tale?

In Roman law, the *status* of a condemned person was more critical than the crime committed for determining the penalty. People with high social standing were likely to be banished for crimes for which people with lesser social standing would be punished by execution. There were a variety of forms of exile that could explain how John might have found himself on Patmos. First, John could have voluntarily chosen exile after a sentence of death had been passed on him. Second, he may have been permanently or temporarily banished to the island, possibly experiencing the loss of property and citizenship rights. Finally, he may have been permanently or temporarily banished from his home territory, and chosen to live on Patmos.⁶ The actual mechanism of John's exile is a matter of speculation, but it is intriguing that John seems to have possessed sufficient social status to avoid the more severe penalty of execution.

Various philosophers, orators, writers, and other elite social critics had been exiled by Rome for daring to challenge the imperial *mythos*, and John seems to have been among their number. Yet John, through his visionary experience on Patmos, presented a message more radical than that of any of his contemporaries. John did not criticize this or that ruler, this or that imperial dynasty, or even this or that empire. John did not advocate a change of leadership or call for political or economic reform. Rather, John saw from the heavenly perspective granted to him that *empire in itself* stood in contradiction to the ways of God, and that communities that embraced YHWH's covenant were the faithful ones. We cannot know the exact circumstances that led John to this island. Yet Revelation tells us that it was the power and truth of the visions he had while there that led this person of high social status to reject completely empire as a way of life. John's willingness to trade his privileged social location in Roman society for life among the struggling *ekklēsiai* represents John's "coming out" of the "great city Babylon." In this John is like those of us whose birthright, skin color, education, or connections have bought us some measure of imperial privilege today.

Another vexing question is the relationship between John and the other New Testament authors. The apostle Paul spent much time in Ephesus (Acts 19:10; 20:17-38). Laodicea is mentioned in the letter to the Colossians (2:1; 4:13, 15, 16). Recent interpretations of Paul's writings suggest that Paul had both a more apocalyptic worldview⁷ and was more critical of the Roman Empire⁸ than was

5. The Greek text leaves room for ambiguity. John may also have gone to Patmos on a missionary journey or to take a retreat after a previous journey.

6. Aune (1997), p. 79.

7. Elliott (1995), pp. 140-80.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-230; Horsley (1997).

usually thought. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke also contain significant sections of apocalyptic discourse (Mark 13; Matt. 24:1-44; Luke 21:5-36). While nowhere in Revelation does John cite his fellow Christian writers, his worldview is consistent with theirs. The major difference is that Revelation is a wholly apocalyptic discourse, whereas Paul and the Synoptic writers only briefly use the apocalyptic genre.

People frequently wonder about the connections between the “Johns” of the New Testament. Did the apostle John—one of the “sons of thunder,” the brother of James (Mark 3:17)—write the Gospel of John, the Revelation to John, and/or the three letters that bear the name John? Numerous hypotheses have been developed to prove any number of variations on the authorship of these five texts. Perhaps David Aune’s summary of the matter is the most that can be said about the issue:

While the final editor-author of Revelation was named “John,” it is not possible to identify him with any other early Christian figures of the same name, including John the son of Zebedee or the shadowy figure of John the Elder. The otherwise unknown author of Revelation in its final form was probably a Palestinian Jew who had emigrated to the Roman province of Asia, perhaps in connection with the first Jewish revolt in 66-70 CE.⁹

Just as we can only speculate about John’s life story, neither can we know the source of John’s authority among the *ekklēsiai*. John clearly names himself as a prophet to the Christians in Asia (22:6, 9), and labels his book as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Yet nowhere does John claim the authority of the office of bishop, presbyter, or deacon that Ignatius of Antioch commended as the structure of the Asian churches only a matter of years after Revelation was written. Although he did not claim hierarchical office, John expected his book to be read aloud in gatherings of the *ekklēsiai*, and his words to be taken seriously. Perhaps most crucially, though, John expected those who receive his book to be prepared to lay down their lives on the basis of the truth of his visionary experiences. Whether John was a traveling prophet or a member-in-exile of one *ekklēsia* in Asia, it was his absolute conviction that the Word of God had revealed to him the true character of empire and that this should be sufficient authority for his fellow Christians.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As noted at the outset, this book is not a commentary but a collection of what we hope will prove to be helpful resources for your own engagement with Revelation. As a way to help you decide which of these resources might respond most immediately to your concerns and needs, we provide now a brief overview of each chapter.

9. Aune (1997), p. lvi.

Chapter 1 begins by taking seriously the modern anxieties that lead many people to seek “wisdom from on high” as a way of finding the “truth” about our lives. We start with an investigation of the modern phenomena of premillennialism and its doctrine of the Rapture, the belief that Jesus will come suddenly at a specific historical moment to carry off true believers to a heaven above. This particularly American tradition and its “prophecy readings” of apocalyptic texts have become, for believers and skeptics alike, the prevailing interpretation of Revelation today. The chapter also surveys modern apocalyptic phenomena that serve for many as substitutes for Revelation in seeking “heavenly” insight: near-death experiences, UFO and alien abduction experiences, New Age phenomena, and Marian apparitions.

Revelation, contrary to the first impression of many mainstream Christians, did not arise from a vacuum. To help readers situate Revelation within its own tradition, chapter 2 explores the roots and branches of apocalyptic literature. It includes a survey of apocalyptic writing in the Hebrew scriptures, New Testament writings, and noncanonical Jewish apocalypses. It begins with an examination of Jewish resistance to the Seleucid Empire two hundred years before Jesus, contrasting the Maccabean ideology of armed insurrection with the praxis of nonviolent resistance to empire proclaimed in the visionary apocalyptic of Daniel. This is followed by a look deeper into the roots of apocalyptic which preceded Daniel in the period after the Babylonian exile during which the Persian Empire controlled Jerusalem. We show here how a split within God’s people over how to respond to the “charms” of empire developed into the apocalyptic tradition upon which Daniel, John, and others built. The chapter concludes with a brief description of apocalyptic literature in the period just before and contemporaneous with the book of Revelation.

Chapter 3 contains a portrait of urban life in the province of Asia in the first-century Roman Empire. This includes an overview of the political, economic, cultural, and mythic dimensions of Roman provincial society. This was the context in which the members of the *ekklēsiai* were called to practice radical discipleship; hence, it is the necessary background to a reading of the book of Revelation.

Chapter 4 explains how differing concepts of time and space between cultures like the United States and Australia, on the one hand, and the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, on the other hand, have left us with a view of apocalyptic in general and Revelation in particular that is preoccupied both with the future and with a heaven that is ultimately unconcerned with our earthly existence. These cultural differences have been a major contributor to the modern misreading of Revelation. We offer in place of these anachronistic misunderstandings a way of looking at Revelation’s spatial and temporal language that respects the mind-set of both John and the *ekklēsiai* to whom he wrote.

Chapter 5 explores the “plot” of Revelation as a way to come to grips with the text’s language of violence and vengeance that repels so many readers today. This plot is encapsulated in the story of the two scrolls and their message of violence, justice, repentance, and nonviolence. This chapter examines Revelation’s

review of history, which begins with YHWH's hope for repentance by way of prophetic warnings, and the "new plan" practiced by Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, who nonviolently witnessed to the truth of God, who was executed for this witness and vindicated by being raised by God.

Chapter 6 portrays the apocalyptic cities of Babylon and New Jerusalem. The two cities are, respectively, how empire and authentic human community look when viewed from the perspective of "heaven." The master metaphor of the two cities includes the command to defect from Babylon to become instead a citizen of New Jerusalem. We explore how this is to be achieved by the difficult, yet glorious, daily practice of life-embracing ways of being in the midst of empire. We show how the path of discipleship is intended to be one of celebration and joy, not the "perpetual Lent" through which it is sometimes caricatured by those who would trivialize the gospel and implicitly approve of empire.

Chapter 7 offers a look at the scenes of worship and liturgy in Revelation. These scenes were written to call the members of the *ekklēsiai* to renew their faith in God and in Jesus and to remind them of the ongoing support they experience from the "heavenly" choir of angels and witnesses. This heavenly worship is expressed in overtly political language: worship of God precludes worship of empire. John's apocalyptic liturgical vision provides a sharp contrast between the seductive yet satanic worship of empire and the joyful celebration of the one, true God.

Chapter 8 is a sort of "post-game wrap-up" which reviews the action in the "battle of myths" between empire and God. We look at how the Roman myths of Empire, Peace, Victory, Faith, and Eternity are appropriated by Revelation and applied not to Rome but to the faithful followers of Jesus. Revelation claims that by embracing the way of God and rejecting empire, the followers of Jesus *already* have true empire, victory, and eternity.

We conclude by asking ourselves the hard question of how Revelation speaks to us today. Chapter 9 presents a case for the argument that nation-states are no longer the bearers and promoters of empire. Instead, the phenomenon of global capital has become the "empire" that dominates our world today. We take a hard but clear-eyed look at how we are seduced by this empire into acceptance of its own mythic claims to divine legitimacy, and how Revelation calls followers of Jesus to resist it and to be faithful to the ways of YHWH in the midst of this empire.

Our engagement with apocalyptic literature generally and with Revelation specifically has challenged, excited, and sometimes overwhelmed us with the power and with the implications of these writings for our way of life. We hope that this book will light an apocalyptic fire in you that will allow the Empire of God to be revealed more fully in the world through you and those with whom you walk on the Way of the Slaughtered Lamb. We are grateful for your willingness to engage along with us the beautiful, disturbing, faith-filled visions that comprise the final book of the Bible.