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Believe in God, Stand Firm, and Proclaim: Being Addressed in Revelation

ROLLIN RAMSARAN

How should we approach the book of Revelation? This is a timeless question that has been asked by almost every generation of Christians—assembled faithful Christians who hail from vastly different times, places, and social-historical circumstances in over two thousand years of church history. And the question comes to us yet again in our own time. How should we approach the book of Revelation? With hope? With hesitation? With fear? With caution? With placement on a pedestal? Or left unopened and hidden and unread?

There is much value in approaching the book of Revelation as a performance composition that produces an empowering and shared ritual worship experience. Such a shared experience among the assembled faithful, in the power of the Spirit, fortifies community identity, provides a pattern for ethics, and reinforces life-giving and formative ritual patterns. Within this larger framework, we can see an additional specific contribution for ministry provided by the interlude passage, Revelation 10.1–11.

A Performance Composition

The study of the New Testament continues to exam the interplay between orality and writing in the first century AD. Since illiteracy in the ancient world ran at a rate of 95%, very much *unlike* our own culture today, it is becoming apparent that the only “reading” of texts was done slowly and methodically by skilled scribes. The content of any written text was carried in the memory of an individual and then actualized for public and broad hearing by “performance.” Performance is the means of presenting a message (often a story) using the full range of present human communication: voice, movement, gesture, emotion, and eye contact. In many cases, the oral composition preceded the eventual writing down of the text. Subsequently, the written text functioned primarily as an aid to memory or a training text for other performers.¹

The book of Revelation, like other recorded New Testament texts, was most likely composed orally with an eye to being performed before an audience. We can look for oral cues within the written text that remains. Such oral cues would include single theme structuring, repetition of themes and key terms, use of metaphor, memorable structural cues, among others. The oral nature and cues of a composition provide a memorable structure and guidance in meaning not only for the performer, but also for the audience.² The power of performance is the interaction of the storyteller with an audience—a shared experience of remembrance, retelling, and replaying of a cultural experience of identity. Storytelling aims at repetition of stories of shared values.³

1. Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003). Note also the work of the Network of Biblical Storytellers for how this perspective is actualized in local churches: www.nbsint.org.

2. For a practical working out of identification of oral cues with respect to the apostle Paul, see Rollin A. Ramsaran, “From Mind to Message: Oral Performance in 1 Corinthians 15” at www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/ramsaran.pdf.

3. Performance, while related in some ways, is not the same thing as “drama.” Performance is tied to a strong interaction between the performer and the audience members. Unlike drama, performance consistently revolves around “breaking [through] the fourth wall.”

A Shared Story with Patterns of Repetition

Despite the shortened name of Revelation, this document is more aptly called “The Revelation of Jesus Christ...to John” (Rev 1.1). *Revelation* or *apocalypse* means a “lifting off” or “uncovering,” a “revealing.” The book of Revelation comes to us in the form and function of Jewish apocalyptic literature—a literature of resistance to dominating and evil imperial rule.⁴ God graciously provides a vision of coming victory through a prophet or seer who then conveys this message of good news of God’s faithfulness to the larger people of God. In Revelation, John, the prophet on Patmos, is the seer who is given a vision by Jesus, with assistance from other angels, of what is seen, what is, and what is to come (Rev 1.1, 9–11, 19). This revelatory vision allows the people of God not only to live within a mindset of the present age (a time marked by evil and domination), but also within the mindset of what is to come (the beginning of victory and peace in the presence of God).

The book of Revelation has a very distinctive theme story: God is coming in judgment and salvation through God’s agent, Jesus, to overcome all evil and to restore to God’s creation the full goodness of God’s rule and presence. To approach Revelation rightly, we must realize that *this story line is frequently repeated* throughout the course of the larger composition. The careful observer apprehends this story line *in miniature for each of the seven letters* to the churches: Jesus comes in judgment and salvation, offering the kingdom to the conquering ones (Rev 2.1–3.22). In the larger narrative, *sometimes this story line is not fully completed*, but instead the story begins another round from the beginning (e.g., the seventh opened seal does not bring the end, but only opens to the first of seven trumpets that begin with judgment all over again—Rev 8.1–6). *Sometimes a smaller part of the story line is presented as a “close-up” scene* in order to fill out the details of a major and significant part of the action (chapters 12–13—how did the vanquishing of evil come about in more detail and what was God’s role in providing protection for the elect?). Yet the completion of God’s kingdom is apparent in 11.15–19 and, of course, again with the new heaven and new earth in 22.1–5. So to approach Revelation rightly is to realize that it tells the story of God’s victory over and over again.⁵ For what reason would an ancient hearer or a group of hearers sit through a 1½ hour oral performance that repeated the same story again and again? It was because the mechanism to reinforce their identity, security, and hope in troubled times was through *continued oral performances of the victory of God through Jesus’ death and resurrection*.

Starting and Ending with Proper Worship

Revelation presents itself as a vision enclosed by introductory (1.1–8) and concluding material (22.18–21) that indicates a letter or epistolary form. It is described as “prophecy” (1.3; 22.19), but, as indicated above, it takes the shape of an apocalypse and functions to (1) critique worldly rulers, (2) restore the chosen people of God, and (3) promise vindication to faithful martyrs.⁶

The approach to a holy God is done with careful preparations and, then, it is experienced as gift. The performer of Revelation brings the audience into the very worship of God through the characterization and enactment of the seer, John, experiencing wonderful things. We are in awe with John as a throne vision of the Almighty unfolds before us (Rev 4.2–11). We fall down as we see John (via the performer) fall down (Rev 1.17). And so our journey begins—and so we are tutored to right and proper worship as we learn not to worship other creatures, whether a beast or societal patterns of greed or even a powerful messenger angel (Rev 13.4; 18.11–20; 22.8–9). We bow in worship in the throne room of God or before the feet of his victorious Christ, Jesus (Rev 1.12–18; 4.1–18; 7.9–12; 11.15–19; 19.1–8; 21.1–5a). To our neglect, we often

4. See now the keen analysis of Anthea E. Porter-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids; MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

5. For the repeating, retelling structure of Revelation’s storyline, see the seminal commentary by William Hendrickson: *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1939), 22–31.

6. For this paradigm see, Richard A. Horsley, “The Kingdom of God and the Renewal of Israel; Synoptic Gospels, Jesus Movements, and Apocalypticism” in *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1 (ed. John J. Collins; New York; Continuum, 1998), 341.

forget that revelatory/apocalyptic literature not only brings a story of God's eventual victory, but also demands a certain way of living among the faithful of God in anticipation of that time.

To approach Revelation rightly is to note its guidance in right worship for John's time as well as our own. We are instructed not to "confessionally compromise." At John's time and in the situation of his Asia Minor communities that meant to renounce allegiance to the Roman Caesar and his death, oppression, and destruction machine (Rev 2.13; 7.13–17 with 14.1–5; 13.11–18; Rev 17–19). In our time it means to use our words to resist any form of domination and oppression rather than supporting such ways through word or silence. Second, we are instructed not to "culturally compromise." In John's time that meant not aligning and participating in local patron-client relationships that tied into the dominant Roman order of oppression (Rev 18.11–20). Today, we are challenged not to align our personal and communal efforts with idolatrous practices and systems that lead to evil and subjugation of others—whether it is in political, economic, or subtle mechanisms of misplaced power, manipulative influence, or unrestrained greed. True worship before God means choosing sides.

Accessing Power through Worship—The Right Worship!

Revelation gives indication of being an oral performance with ritualized components. Not only does it direct an audience to proper worship, but it also provides the setting, participation, and repetition in which to enact community worship. This worship then provides a power to live in a new dimension—even in the present time!

The performance of Revelation may very well have been connected to the early Christian ritual pattern of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. "The revelation of/from Jesus Christ" comes to John while he is "in the Spirit" on the Lord's Day (Rev 1.1, 10). This performance of Revelation, ostensibly within the context of the Lord's Supper, establishes a setting of congregational worship and a story of identity through worship that is then sent by John to at least seven churches in Asia Minor. Analogous to Paul's idea of the Lord's Supper centering on the proclamation of the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11.26), John portrays how the "lamb who was slain" event (Rev 4.6) has now begun the completion of God's plan which leads to Jesus' coming and the fullness of God's rule (Rev 19.11–16). This is a story to be repeated and remembered (Rev 22.7, 10, 19). Paul describes worship with instructions concerning the Lord's Supper and gives explanations of how to conduct proper worship with regard to other aspects and gifts (1 Cor 11–15)—then he pronounces the Aramaic *Maranatha* ("Our Lord, come!) upon it (1 Cor 16.22). John provides a performance of worship built on the setting of the Lord's Day, with the content of the Lord's Supper—and then pronounces a *Maranatha* (in Greek translation, "Come, Lord Jesus!) upon it (Rev 22.20). Powerful moments—moments of power!

Audience participation in the performance of Revelation is marked by imagery and song. Ritual has the ability to transcend time itself. A ritualized performance of Revelation engages the audience not only "through the ear," but also in the mind through imagination and in the heart by deep emotions. This is accomplished through the rich and varied imagery of the composition. Not to engage the imagination while experiencing a performance of Revelation is not to see the vibrant colors, not to hear the distinctive sounds, not to feel the weight of awe in the very presence of the Almighty and his Christ. The present is invigorated—it has been given power—by having been taken up into the future completion of God's will and purposes. The one who suffers, the one who is threatened, the one who is tempted now resists with assurance and strength.

To approach Revelation rightly is to see a performance anticipating full-embodied response from audience members. Songs and hymns are sung or chanted; members of the congregation experience worship in God's presence, victory over the forces of oppression, and the communion of the faithful saints across time. Investigating the performance aspect of the hymnody and songs in Revelation is still in infancy, but the following sections from chapters 15 and 19 provide instructive songs as examples:

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, O King of the ages! Who shall fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy. All the nations shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed." (15.3–4)

“Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great! . . . Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure.” (19.5–8)

At an early point in the telling of Revelation (5.1–14), the repetition of the story line has been shaped within a strong and subversive context: the lion of Judah is the lamb that was slain.⁷ Revelation is a battle for the hearts and minds of human beings. Hence, in risky fashion, Revelation’s imagery is replete with terms of violence, war, and victory—all designating a present battle of resistance against evil by the people of God as they journey towards God’s change and restoration. But Revelation’s images of violence, war, and victory do not provide the method and means of God’s change, as might be commonly inferred from the larger cultural context of Roman religion.⁸ Rather the commonly known methods and means for worldly domination and victory are disarmed, subverted, and transformed—Jesus demonstrates that power obtained through suffering brings life, wholeness, and the full presence of God.

Keeping One’s Feet on the Earth: An Instructive Interlude

Revelation 10.1–11 is an interesting section for considering both how we might envision its performance and how we might approach and respond to the larger story of Revelation in our own lives and ministry. This section functions as an “interlude” or a pause between marked elements of the story line. In Revelation 4, John the seer was taken up into heaven to witness worship before God (4.1–11). The heavens become distressed at an interruption in God’s ongoing plan and purposes as represented by a sealed scroll (5.1–4). But John sees an unexpected event: God’s ways are set in motion again by the Lion of Judah who appears as a slain lamb worthy to open the seals on this closed scroll (5.5–14). Hence, the death and resurrection of Jesus leads the way forward to judgment of the wicked and full restoration for the faithful and the world. But how will it happen? The seals must be removed and the scroll opened. Six opened seals bring the story line to the possibility of God’s full restoration of the kingdom (6.1–7.17). But the seventh and final seal opens out into a new telling of the story rather than its conclusion. A trumpet blast. Then another. Then a succession of four more trumpet blasts. Judgment is starkly recounted again (8.1–9.19). Now, we anticipate, comes the seventh and final trumpet blast—the victory of God (cf. 1 Thess 4.16–17; 1 Cor 15.52; Matt 24.31)! But no! An interlude!

In 10.1–7 we encounter an immense and majestic angel with a little scroll in his hand: “he set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on land.” The voice of the angel “thundered” seven times and it was if a lion roared! And the gravity of it all pulled John toward the culmination of the victory of God and that impending seventh trumpet sound. But God (“a voice from heaven”) pulled John back (!): “Do not write it down.” And again, that majestic angel raised his right hand and swore by the God of heaven and earth that the seventh trumpet would not be delayed—let the full mystery of God’s victory be fulfilled! But God (“the voice which I heard from heaven”) again called John back! And following down the road of Ezekiel before him (Ezek 2.8–3:4), John is commanded to take the open scroll from this majestic angel, who in turn, tells him to eat it—for it will taste as sweet as honey, but will be bitter in his stomach (10.8–9).

Is this John’s scroll or is this our scroll? Apocalyptic revelation is given to the seer to give to the people of God.⁹ The book of Revelation *in performance* allows us to hear and experience what John did. This is our scroll also—sweet to taste and bitter in the stomach. To approach Revelation rightly, we—along with John—must see clearly the commission presented before us. We can and should live in hope and expectation. But,

7. Note the excellent discussion of this point in David L. Barr, *New Testament Story: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009), 443–46.

8. Some modern conceptions of the message of Revelation are prone to portraying God’s means to victory in renewed military might rather than through suffering and death in Jesus. Revelation takes up the images of war and violence to subvert them, not to glorify them.

9. “I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this *testimony for the churches*” (22.16; my emphasis).

regrettably, we can also get caught up in the excitement of worship and the imagination of it all being over—such that assurance, so rightly granted to us by the message and performance of Revelation, can lead to satiation, inwardness, and a withdrawal from the mission of God. But Revelation 10.1–11—this interlude—will have none of this. For in the tension between the historical moment and the coming victory of God, we are commissioned to “prophesy again.” We are called to continue to take the sweet message of good news to all nations—knowing that our efforts will be hindered by the bitterness of worldly resistance, suffering, and persecution (10.11).

To approach Revelation rightly, we must assume our stance, in every time and every place, to “prophesy again!” We are committed to take the good news of Jesus amidst and against every obstacle in every place and to all people in need. And as we go, we are surrounded on every side of this story with the powerful message that God’s victory is sure and our place is secure within it. If we hear the words of this story performed time and time again, we perform the story together in worship and ritual, and we acknowledge our call to be in mission to the world. And now sent out, we believe God, we stand firm, and we proclaim.

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