

# **Theological Symposium Papers**

(includes a homily from the Solemn Assembly worship service by Roger Hahn and Plenary Service addresses by Tom Nees and John A. Knight)

# **HOPE** for a hurting world

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**“To the Angel of the Church, Write:  
A Biblical Vision of a Just World in the Book of Revelation”  
by Daniel Spross and John Wright**

The slightest shift in sounds can reveal tremendous shifts in the meaning of words. Humorous stories arise from the mission field where the novice missionary misplaces an accent and utters “pig” rather than “salvation.” Perhaps, therefore, it is not insignificant that many evangelicals now speak of the Book of Revelations, rather than the Book of Revelation. Such language indicates a reading strategy that evangelical readers often take to the book. Evangelicals tend to read the book as a series of visions (revelations) unfolding a chain of events that reaches from the present into the future. Armed with this revealed future, the evangelical awaits his/her personal, sudden removal from the earth so that God’s wrath may wreak destruction upon creation and eternal devastation upon unrepentant humans. Sinners have tarot cards and palm readers; Christians have a better, inerrant source for predicting the future in the “Book of Revelations”.

Such a reading strategy is interesting, not necessarily because of what it reveals about the book, but what it conceals: the revelation (singular) from which the book’s title comes is not of the end times, but of its origin. The book is the revelation, the apocalypse, of Jesus Christ (Rev 1:1).

As a series of visions, spiraling creation downward into the abyss, the Book of Revelation would seem an odd place to begin a theological symposium on compassionate ministries. Indeed, the book shakes with terrible visions of God’s wrath and judgment: “Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven: ‘Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders--flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great’” (Rev. 20:17-8). Yet when one reads the text as the “revelation of Jesus Christ,” the lion of Judah who conquers by becoming the lamb that was slain, we must read the visions of God’s judgment with an entirely different strategy than one that seeks to justify harm upon one’s self-declared enemies, while declaring oneself immune from all judgment.

As a linear trip towards the end of time, the “Book of Revelations” can easily legitimate vindictiveness towards those unlike us. As the world descends towards annihilation, in an odd way, the reader may find security in preparing to protect oneself through violence against the impending threats. It is no accident that militia groups and ardent nationalists, American or otherwise, often find consolation in its pages. Yet as the ‘revelation of Jesus Christ,’ the Book of Revelation tells a different tale: the book narrates God’s vindication of God’s good creation through the death, resurrection, and return of the one for sinners slain, Jesus Christ. The key to reading becomes suffering with those who suffer in behalf of righteousness in hope of God’s ultimate triumph over evil -- a virtue near, if not at the center of the Christian virtue of compassion.

This paper will seek to present a reading strategy of compassion as a means of opening the Book of Revelation to the reader anew. We will do this in two ways: first, through suggesting general interpretive categories through which to read book and second, to justify this approach by showing the close relationship between the letters that

begin the book and the visions that compose the majority of the text and conclude it. Ultimately, a reading strategy must account for what we find in the text. If our reading is helpful, the Book of Revelation will both justify and define the nature of a distinctly Christian understanding of compassion, calling forth the faithful practice of the church as we await God's restoration of God's good creation.

#### An Introduction to the Book of Revelation and the Biblical Vision of a Just World

It doesn't take a trained expert to notice that the Book of Revelation is a rather unique type of writing, a type biblical scholars have called apocalyptic literature. This type of literature blossomed among certain Jewish groups in the centuries immediately before and following the death and resurrection of our Lord. Within the Christian Scriptures, one finds the book of Daniel as a similar writing. Outside the Bible, various examples of apocalyptic literature have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as in other Jewish and Christian documents from this time, such as IV Baruch. Whereas once scholars tended to read apocalyptic literature as escapist, recent research has seen better how this literature relates to the real life conditions of living without power under oppressive political forces. Apocalyptic literature seems to have arisen to maintain a certain group's or community's fundamental commitments and boundaries amidst hostile social, political, and economic forces.

This background of apocalyptic literature has revolutionized our understanding of the Book of Revelation. The fundamental question that echoes throughout all its pages is very simple: who controls the world and its destiny: God or forces that oppose God? The answer endorsed by the book is clear: "all glory and honor and power" belong to the One seated upon the throne, the One "who was, and is, and is to come" (Rev 4:9). The book is radically theocentric: its focus, ground, and goal all begin with and lead to the Throne. While spiritual/political forces currently oppose the will of the One on the Throne, the book clearly states that the rule of God, in justice and righteousness, will triumph forever and ever.

The conviction of God's ultimate rule over all creation provides the key to forming a reading strategy that will open the Book of Revelation. First, the Book of Revelation may be read as a prayer for justice, a plea to God against military and economic violence directed against God's creation and especially, God's people. It is too easily forgotten that worship and prayer frames the Book of Revelation. The book begins as John the seer is "in the Spirit" on the Lord's Day (1:6), and concludes with an early Christian prayer, often uttered in early Christianity right before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, "Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). The whole book unfolds in the context of prayer; indeed, it exists as prayer -- communication between the seer and God -- done in the context of the church at worship.

Yet another context frames the prayer of the book as well: the context of the oppressive, violent world around the seer. When the Lamb breaks the first seal, four horses ride out in sequence (6:2-8). The sequence is not incidental, but describes the affects of wars of conquest from the perspective of the poor. The white horse rides out to conquer in its public grandeur (v. 2); the red horse follows, showing the consequences of the initial parade -- the carnage that occurs in battle. As a result of war, the third horse, black ensues (vv. 5-6). War has brought about food shortages. The cost of supporting the army abroad means exorbitant prices at home, out of the range of all but the wealthy.

Finally, the fourth horse appears, the pale horse (vv. 7-8). Inflation and scarcity has brought about starvation and disease. Now the poor at home die. The sequence explodes the ideology of the 'glory of war'. The white horse is revealed for what it truly is: a means of the death and exploitation of the poor, even the poor in behalf of whom the army is sent out. The Book of Revelation pulls no punches -- the context of the Book is the exploitative world pursuing its own interests at the expense of the powerless.

At this point, the book moves possibly to its most moving scene, a prayer within the prayer, the prayer of the saints under the altar (v. 9-10). These are those who have first hand experience of suffering under this same exploitive power, those "slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained" (v. 9). These saints explicitly pray for justice: "How long, Sovereign Lord, . . . until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (v. 10). If the One on the Throne is in control, surely the prayers from under the altar ring true. Justice must be invoked in light of the violence, hidden under the cloak of the "glories" of the white horse.

How long? Reading the Book of Revelation as a prayer for justice forces us out of our 'comfort zone', forces us to read compassionately with those who suffer for righteousness sake. The book no longer reads as vindictiveness against the other who is not like us, it reads as a plea, a prayer, the heart's cry for God to intervene to stop the mindless butchering and exploitation of human beings and creation that occurs all around our world, hidden under the guise of 'national interests.' The Book of Revelation reads well as a prayer for justice.

A second strategy for reading the Book of Revelation is the flip side of the prayer for justice: Revelation may be read well as the hope for vindication of the faithful. The book never attempts to conceal the cost of following Jesus Christ; indeed, it assumes it. The visions presume a conflict between the faithful and the world. Both belong to fundamentally different spiritual/social realities. Nor does the book pretend that God has already effaced evil from the earth. It presupposes the necessity of faith to live as if the One of the Throne is actually there. Yet the book does not merely utter a hopeless prayer for justice; the prayer for justice is powered by the hope for vindication of the church. The book abounds in references to the rewards of the one "who overcomes": "He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son" (21:7; see also (2.7,11,26; 3.5,12,21). The struggle now is not in vain. The book confidently declares that the One on the Throne will prevail through the Lion who is a slain Lamb: "they will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings--and with him will be his called, chosen, and faithful followers" (17:14). Yet the Lamb does not wear the blood of others, but, rather, his own: "I saw the heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. . . . He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God" (19:11-13). Rather than the white horse that brought forth oppression, having to conceal its true nature, the white horse and its rider at the end of the book come forth truthfully to restore the reign of God on earth to its rightful place, eclipsing evil and the oppression of others. Vindication is at hand.

The ultimate vindication, however, comes in the end. The book does not lead the reader to escape to some ethereal realm of individual eternal bliss; vindication comes within the constraints of creation: "'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom

of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (12:15). The final vision of the book entails the same scene: the new Jerusalem descends upon the earth (21:2). Here the pre-fall creation re-emerges, and the saints rule from the city. The tree of life reappears, “and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (22:2). The faithfulness of the followers of the Lion-Lamb has been vindicated. Their suffering will not last forever, but becomes the means that even the nations will be healed. The Book of Revelation is not merely a prayer for justice, it also can be read to convey hope for the vindication of the faithful through this time of suffering until the kingdom of God is established in its fullness. Compassion, arising out of prayer for justice, is sustained by hope for the vindication of God’s reign over the earth through the Lion who is a Lamb.

A final strategy opens the book to the reader: the Book of Revelation may be read as a call to passive resistance, a solidarity with those who suffer under the powers of the age. First those who profitted off the oppression of others share in the terror of the demise of the anti-God forces: “When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her [Babylon the Great] and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. . . . In her was found the blood of the prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on earth” (18:9, 24). The prophets and saints stand who those mindlessly murdered. They, therefore, “overcame . . . by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them” (12:11-12a). The prophets and saints conquer by refusing to participate in and profit from the power of the anti-God forces. Resistance is not futile; suffering with those who suffer under the oppression of others, even at the cost of their lives, leads to a celebration in the heavenly realms. The saints overcome by refusing active participation in the forces of violence and oppression. The saints triumph by giving their lives, rather than taking the lives of others.

In this resistance, the saints have a model: the Lion of Judah who appears as a Lamb “looking as if it had been slain” (5:6). The Lion-Lamb is alone worthy to open the seals of the scroll, bringing into history the will of the One on the Throne. He is “‘worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priest to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth’” (5:9-10). The Lion-Lamb’s authority arises not out of his might, but out of his solidarity with those who suffer, suffering death himself, thereby purchasing humans for God. Victory comes in obedience unto death, trusting the One on the Throne to vindicate Him by raising Him from death to life eternal. Therefore, the Lamb receives the worship of the saints, along with the One on the Throne as God (7:10-11). The Lamb draws His power from His weakness, by the giving of His life, rather than taking the lives of others. The Lion of Judah thus stands as a model for the saints to refuse identification with the powerful of this age, staying obedient to the One on the Throne, and identifying with those who suffer from the powers who attempt to usurp the role of God. Through the character of the Lion-Lamb, the book of Revelation made be read as a strategy for passive resistance to the powers of the age, refusing to participate in and benefit from the violence and oppression exercised upon the poor and the needy. In the Lion-Lamb, compassion is not confused with a therapeutic niceness, but in the revolutionary self-

emptying that leads to God’s judging of evil and restoring creation to its pre-fall harmony.

Reading the Book of Revelation through the trifold strategy of a prayer for justice, a hope for vindication, and a call to passive resistance opens the book to be read as the revelation of Jesus Christ, rather than linear revelations of the end time. The strategy thus brings the reader in line with the explicit claim of the book. The strategy also opens up many other facets of the book that otherwise tends to be obscured rather than clarified. One central point opened is the relation between the letters at the beginning of the book and the visions that follow. It is to this relationship and its significance that we may now turn.