



Spirituality and the Book of Revelation



Michael J Gorman

Michael J Gorman holds the Raymond E. Brown Chair in Biblical Studies and Theology at St Mary's Seminary & University in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. His research interests include the letters of Paul and the book of Revelation.

The title of this article might seem counterintuitive, if not downright counterfactual and hence self-contradictory. How could there be any worthwhile Christian spirituality in a biblical book that depicts (at least as commonly thought) a god of vengeance destroying the world and most of its creatures – except perhaps those who have been 'raptured' to heaven (at least as commonly believed by certain Christians) before all hell breaks loose. While some Christians gravitate toward and even specialise in the book of Revelation, with its alleged prophecies about the Antichrist and the imminent end of the world, other people, both Christians and non-Christians, avoid it or even dismiss it as sub-Christian. Early on, Martin Luther argued that Christ is 'neither taught nor known in it', and Nietzsche called Revelation 'the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history'.¹ This book of the Bible would seem capable only of generating a spirituality marked by fear, apathy about the world, and/or vengeance or even violence. Unfortunately, at times Revelation has done just that.

Any attempt either to overcome these perceptions of Revelation or to allow it to shape Christian spirituality in positive, healthy ways requires a sustained process of unlearning and relearning that is far beyond the scope of this brief article. Fortunately, there are many good books on Revelation that address these concerns.² In the space that we have, I want simply to say something first about how *not* to read Revelation and, in contrast, how to read it. Then, secondly, I will propose five features of the spirituality of the book of Revelation, all of which can and should form our Christian lives today.

Reading Revelation responsibly

Many people read Revelation as if it were an advance video of future events. While understandable, this approach is fundamentally misguided. It is doomed to missing the literary genre, purpose, focus and content of the book; in other words, it is doomed to interpretive failure!

Revelation refers to itself as both revelation (*apokalypsis*) and prophecy (1.1,3; 22.10). These elements are located within a letter format (see 1.1–8; 22.6–20). This suggests that we should read Revelation as apocalyptic literature with a prophetic purpose addressed first of all to specific churches in what is now Western Turkey. Today, many scholars believe that the primary problem these churches faced was not persecution, as has often been posited in the past, but the temptation to compromise, perhaps to avoid persecution. This compromise would mean returning to social, religious, political and economic practices (which were all intermingled in the first century) that would be inappropriate for Christian believers. A prophetic word would be a message, like that of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Amos, of both judgment and the hope of salvation.

A responsible reading of Revelation will therefore include the following interpretive principles:

- Consider the features of ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature, especially symbolism and poetry, which appeal to the imagination.
- Consider the functions of prophecy: providing comfort and challenge, hope and warning, rather than specific predictions about dates.

- Interpret Revelation's symbolism and prophetic language first of all within a first-century rather than a twenty-first-century framework.
- Look for situations and realities in our own day that are analogous to those depicted in Revelations symbols, rather than look for literal, specific future events and figures.
- Stay focused on bigger, thematic issues rather than on disputed details, letting Revelation appeal to the disciplined, informed imagination about theological/spiritual matters.
- Remember that the focus of Revelation is not the Antichrist but the living Christ.

With these briefly stated principles in mind, we turn to consider a few key aspects of Revelation and Christian spirituality.

A spirituality grounded in worship

The spirituality of the book of Revelation begins with worship. John is caught up in the Spirit on the Lord's day, at worship, when he has a vision of the ascended but ever-present Lord Jesus (1.10–20). He is later given a vision of the worship of God and the Lamb that takes place in heaven (chs. 4–5). This beautiful vision, which has given rise to amazing paintings and music over the centuries, is meant to do more than make John and us spectators. It is meant to draw us in, to make us participants in the never-ceasing, universal adoration of the sovereign Creator and the slain Saviour.

Such worship centres us, grounds us, gives us focus. It is not merely a matter of 'feeling good' about ourselves and the company we keep, or even about God. Rather, worship of God and the Lamb is a matter of offering both our praise and our allegiance, our lips and our lives, to the Creator–Redeemer and to no one else – no other so-called lord or god or saviour. Without worship, our lives, even as Christians, can slowly become the domain of other, competing lords and saviours on offer in our culture.

I have been amazed, perplexed and distressed for the last few years at the seemingly growing number of sincere Christians who believe that corporate worship is an optional part of Christian spirituality. They may be active in the church's activities, even leading some, but they still don't go to worship; they may feel that private Scripture reading and prayer suffices; or they may find spiritual nurture in the company of other, often disaffected, former churchgoers.

This tendency is deadly for Christian spirituality. The need for worship, says Revelation, is not first of all a question of *obligation* (though it is that – 'Worthy art thou') but a question of *formation*: in worship we are constantly re-formed into a people who know, love and serve God together with saints past and present, and who do so in concert with an unseen but real chorus of creatures who remind us that this God is the One truly worthy of our absolute devotion. On Patmos, John could not physically worship with others, but this was not by choice – and God granted him the heavenly vision of

worship, perhaps, to compensate. Unless we are on a desert island, implies Revelation, Christian spirituality without worship is a thoroughly self-contradictory and dangerous situation in need of immediate attention.

A spirituality of discernment, vision and imagination

One reason that worship is so central to the spirituality of Revelation and to our own spirituality is that worship offers us an alternative vision of God and of reality that unveils and challenges all of the not-gods, the idols, of a given culture. The first-century gods that needed unveiling and challenging were the idols of a pagan culture, not least the emperor, who was hailed in many ways as the 'king of kings and lord of lords' (Rev 17.4). Christian believers then and now have known that God alone is God, that Jesus alone is Lord, but the implications of that confession have not always been thoroughly thought-through in the context of their particular cultures. False gods are by nature appealing, seductive. They may be gods of pleasure or power or politics, or all of the above. But they and their demands, their idolatrous and unjust practices, need to be named and resisted. But without worship, and the vision it offers, resistance is futile.

It is when the Church is assembled in worship that it can hear the voice of God, which Revelation identifies with both the voice of Jesus and the voice of the Spirit. In the seven famous 'letters' or 'prophetic oracles' of Revelation 2–3, Jesus addresses the churches (2.1,8,12,18; 3.1,7,14) and calls them to discern 'what the Spirit is saying to the churches' (2.7,11,17,29; 3.6,13,22). In most messages, there is both commendation and correction; the corrections needed are specific to each congregation but also sufficiently general that all churches, both in the first century and in the twenty-first, can learn from them: returning to love and good works, being faithful even in the face of persecution, avoiding idolatry and immorality (whether literal or spiritual), and so on. The role of spiritual discernment today is to make the connections among three realities: (1) the clear requirements of faithfulness to God and the Lamb; (2) the situations faced by the churches of Revelation; and (3) the situations we face in our own contexts. What are the similarities? The analogous temptations?

All of this requires imagination. The book of Revelation appeals to our imagination, reshaping it and converting it so that we can first imagine and then embody greater faithfulness.³

A spirituality of countercultural faithfulness

We have been suggesting that Revelation's visions of worship and its sense of the ongoing voice of Jesus speaking to the churches is first of all about forming Christians for faithful life in an idolatrous political and social environment. This means, in a profound sense, that Christian worship and spirituality are always and everywhere forms of political activity; indeed, we might say, *theopolitical* activity. It is a question of *God's* politics. Revelation reminds us that there are entities, both divine (God, the Lamb, and the Spirit: 1.4–5) and demonic

NOTES

1. See MJ Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness – Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), pp. 1–2.

2. See, e.g., DA deSilva, *Unholy Allegiances: Heeding Revelation's Warnings* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013) and Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*. Readable and theologically astute commentaries include I Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) and EH Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991 [1988]). The best treatment of Revelation's theology is R Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For the historical situation of the churches, see SJ Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

(the dragon [Satan] and the beasts: chapters 12 – 13), competing for the allegiance of our minds and bodies. Speaking of Christian spirituality as a form of ‘politics’ or ‘theopolitics’ is simply a way of saying that this is the case; spirituality is about our public life, says Revelation, not merely our private thoughts or personal, closely held beliefs.

The book of Revelation, then, calls the Church to ‘come out’ (18.4) of Babylon, of Rome, of any power that opposes God and the Lamb, whether explicitly or implicitly; the entire book is a call to what one scholar has called ‘first-commandment faithfulness’. This coming out does not mean literally leaving but, rather, a departure from the anti-God and anti-Lamb values and practices that shape the Church’s host culture. Thus the Church must leave the world in order to enter the world, to engage the world, on God’s terms instead of the world’s own terms. Accordingly, the flip side — or perhaps, better, the public side — of faithfulness is witness.

A spirituality of communal prophetic and evangelical witness

Some parts of the book of Revelation — the opening vision (ch 1), the seven messages (chs 2 – 3), the vision of heavenly worship (chs 4 – 5), and the final vision of the new heaven and new earth (chs 21 – 22) — are relatively easy to understand, and to ‘swallow’. But the bulk of the book, chapters 6 – 20, is more challenging. These are the chapters that contain the visions of judgment. To be sure, there are interludes — including visions of salvation — that give readers or hearers an occasional pause from the intensity of those visions. Nevertheless, Revelation 6 – 20 is difficult in terms of rhetoric, theology, and spirituality.

An important rhetorical and theological consideration is that these visions should not be taken literally. They are symbolic, and they have to be so. God the creator of all does not need to literally destroy the human and non-human creation in order to terminate evil and save the very creation being destroyed. Rather, the visions are symbols, in the language of the first century, of the total removal of evil. Today other verbal and pictorial symbols of total annihilation might be useful to express the end of sin and death. The point is that God — and those who side with God — will be victorious, will ‘conquer’, as the book of Revelation often puts it (2.7,11,17,26,28; 3.5,12,21; 5.5; 12.11; 15.2; 17.14; 21.7).

The question for Christian spirituality is, What is the Church and the individual Christian to do in the face of impending judgment and ultimate salvation? The book of Revelation suggests at two related activities: prophetic witness and evangelical witness.

Revelation 11 tells us about two prophetic witnesses. Whatever biblical figures serve as models for these witnesses, in Revelation they symbolise, at least in part, the Church’s mission of continuing the voice of God’s prophets, from those of the Old Testament to John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles. This witness must be faithful even when it is opposed, even when the prophet

is threatened and persecuted. Furthermore, this witness must always bear the shape of the Lamb that was slain; that is, it is a non-violent witness, even in the face of opposition: ‘If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is the endurance and faithfulness of the saints’ (13.10, alt.). Ultimately, then, Christian witness is witness to the Faithful Witness, Jesus the Lamb who was slain (1.5; 3.14).

For that reason, Christian witness cannot simply be reactive, or critical of its culture. Rather, the Church is also the bearer of good news. It shares in the angelic mission of proclaiming the ‘eternal gospel ... to those who live on the earth — to every nation and tribe and language and people’ (14.6). Since the Church itself is drawn from every nation, tribe, language, and people, it wants to share that good news with all, the good news that Jesus Christ is ‘the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth’, the one who ‘loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’ (1.5–6). That is good news indeed!

A spirituality of hope

As we have noted, the book of Revelation is often associated with doom and gloom, with destruction. But Revelation is ultimately a book of hope. It concludes with an amazing vision of the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21.1 – 22.5) that concludes the Bible’s grand narrative from creation to new creation, as promised by the prophets (e.g., Is 65.17–25). This is not merely a vision of saints marching into the new Jerusalem and finding streets of gold; it is a vision of the enlightenment, healing, and glory (honour) of the nations (21.24,26; 22.2). Humanity in all its diversity (5.9) is being brought into a state of harmony and reconciliation with God and within itself. That is a message of hope that leads to a spirituality of hope. God’s ultimate purposes are for the healing of the world. That healing requires judgment and cleansing, yes, but God’s final word is not judgment but mercy: even the kings of the earth that had ‘fornicated’ with the beast (17.2,18; 18.3,9) and made war against the Lamb (19.19) have a place in the new heaven and earth (21.24).

Does this mean universalism — salvation for all? No; the beast is gone; the sources of evil have disappeared (20.10), as have those whose names are not written in the book of life (20.15). But the driving vision of Christian spirituality is not the hope (or fear) of judgment and destruction but the hope of healing, of newness and goodness.

Conclusion

I have been suggesting in this article that Revelation can and should shape our lived experience of the Christian faith — our spirituality — in a variety of ways. Let those who have ears hear what the Spirit is saying to us, wherever we happen to be, today.

3. On Revelation and imagination, see especially Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*.

4. Charles H Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), pp. 11, 87, 100, 114.

5. On this see especially NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2007).