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The Reality of Christian Worship as Depicted in Revelation

by Bruce E. Shields

The book of Revelation seems strange to readers at the turn of the twenty-first century, partly because it attempts to describe a reality that we do not experience directly. Of course, most of the people to whom the book was originally addressed did not experience that reality either, but our modern educations have conditioned us to be suspicious of any mention or description of "things not seen" (Heb 11:1).¹ Therefore, when we read a description of dragons and other strange creatures battling, we switch to the mode of science fiction or fantasy, both of which we might be interested in, but which we also definitely categorize as fiction and therefore not reality.

A primary impression of unreality the reader gets from a read-through of Revelation is the inordinate amount of space/time given to worship. Even to many people in churches, worship seems to be a "royal 'waste' of time," as Marva Dawn puts it in her latest book.² Twelve of the twenty-two chapters of the book of Revelation contain direct references to or descriptions of worship. It is too easy to dismiss

those references along with the more fantastic descriptions in the book as belonging to the general genre of apocalyptic, thus sounding erudite and in this way not having to deal with worship in heaven. However, if we are to take the book seriously at any level, we must come to grips with the dominant role of worship in it.

To do this, it would be helpful to consider the reality of our Sunday morning worship experiences. A social scientist can easily describe what we do in our services of worship. We get together with folks very much like ourselves, we sing some songs relating to our faith, we read from our holy book, we offer prayers to an invisible being, we hear an exhortation by one of our leaders, we participate in a ritual of eating bread and drinking juice, and we go home. Is that an adequate description of what goes on in those hours? We believers want to say that there is much more to it than that. We claim that we come together because of God's call and claim on our lives, that we relate to one another not because we are similar people but

because we are all sinners saved by our Christ. We sing those songs believing that God hears them and is pleased. We hear that book as God's word to us. We attend to the preaching as the proclamation of God's word. We participate in the Lord's Supper at his invitation and in his honor or memory. In short, at the best of those times of worship we are aware of an unseen presence among us. "God himself is with us," we sing, and we mean it.

Can we, then, read the accounts of worship in Revelation as reality? Might they not describe much more of the reality of Christian worship than the social scientist would? In this book the curtain that normally hides the heavenly reality from our eyes is pulled back. Here, perhaps better than anywhere else, we can see the reality of Christian worship.

Chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation lay a firm foundation for an understanding of the reality of worship. This passage begins with the presence of God, the object of all true worship. It is the first glimpse the book gives us of heaven. John is finished now with the hortatory

letters to the seven churches to which the book is addressed. "After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this'" (4:1). The door is open, and what does he see? He sees God.

At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. (4:2–6a)

Here is the center of Christian worship—God enthroned; God more captivating than fine jewels; God framed by a jewel-like rainbow; God surrounded by people crowned, clothed in white, occupying other thrones; God with lightning and thunder emanating from his throne; God with his seven torch-like spirits accompanying him, with a calm-as-glass crystal sea reflecting his glory. Light, pure and beautiful, dominates the description of God. These descriptive elements appear elsewhere in the Bible, but here John brings them together in a deeply impressive way to draw our attention to the central figure—God.

Who are the worshipers? We have already mentioned the twenty-four elders. The number is probably the sum of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus. They appear to represent God's people throughout human history. At any rate, they appear to be closest to the divine throne. Then we find further descriptions:

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

"Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and
is to come." (4:6b–8)

Here we meet some strange creatures, full of eyes, so as not to miss anything. The first resembles a lion, the creature we connect with majesty. The second is like an ox, the symbol of strength. The third has a human face, exhibiting wisdom. The fourth is like an eagle, the swift creature. The majesty, strength, wisdom, and mobility of God's creation are worshiping here.³ Their worship is unceasing adoration of the holy Lord God Almighty. And as they express their worship, the twenty-four elders fall down before God, throw down their crowns, and sing:

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor
and power,
for you created all things,

and by your will they existed and were created. (4:11)

In the words of Eugene Peterson:

In worship every sign of life and every impulse to holiness, every bit of beauty and every spark of vitality—Hebrew patriarchs, Christian apostles, wild animals, domesticated livestock, human beings, soaring birds—are arranged around this throne center that pulses light, showing each at its best, picking up all the colors of the spectrum in order to show off the glories.⁴

And then the word of God—the scroll—becomes visible, but it is securely closed.

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. (5:1–4)

This scroll has a lot of information in it—"written on the inside and on the back"—but nobody can open it. Nobody can explain or apply it. The information is useless because it is inaccessible. "Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals'" (5:5). The conquering Christ can open it. Only with the help of Christ can the word of God become accessible. But who is this victorious Lion of the

tribe of Judah?

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. (5:6–7)

The Lion is a Lamb—a slaughtered Lamb, no less. Here worship is flavored with the kind of oxymoron that characterizes the gospel of Christ.⁵ Paul learned the hard way that God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). So in heaven the ability to make God's word accessible to God's people belongs only to the seven-horned, seven-eyed lamb that has been killed. Not only can he open it, he can take it from the strong right hand of God Almighty.

Now comes the singing of the main congregation. First the elders and the four creatures sing a new song:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,
and they will reign on earth. (5:9–10)

Then the angels join the singing:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! (5:12)

And finally,

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (5:13)

Let your imagination play with the scene. Twenty-four white-robed elders and four mighty creatures begin the music by singing praises to the Christ, they are joined by myriads of angels, and finally, every creature made by God joins in the singing of praises to both Christ and God.

Music is the most appropriate response available to the sensate creatures of God. The human voice can make art and sense at the same time. We can worship with our emotions and our intelligence simultaneously. With the voice we can express ourselves beautifully. Such music stirs our souls and stimulates our minds; moreover, it apparently pleases God—and that, after all, is the point of all our worship. "Worship sings. Singing is speech intensified and expanded. Song takes the natural rhythms and timbre of speech and develops its accents and intonations into music."⁶

Music continues to be a primary medium of praise in the rest of the book. Revelation 7 describes a scene in the presence of a great multitude of people.

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor

and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." (7:11–12)

Chapter 11 presents another song:

We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.
The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth. (11:17–18)

That song is followed by the opening of heaven, the appearance of the ark of the covenant, and "flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail" (11:19).

Chapter 15 shows the victorious army of God's people with harps, singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb:

Great and amazing are your deeds,
Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
King of the nations!
Lord, who will not fear
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your judgments have been revealed. (15:3–4)

Chapters 16 and 19 also present poetic ascriptions of praise without the mention of singing, although in the first century the normal way of

reading to a group of people was to chant or sing the words, and thus even those passages would have been heard by their original audiences as songs.

Music continues to be a favorite and appropriate way for human beings to express worship to God. Many of our Christian hymns, choruses, and gospel songs reflect the worship described in Revelation. The words to the chorus Pauline Michael Mills wrote in 1963 are taken directly from Rev 4:11 and 5:9:

Thou art worthy, Thou art worthy,
Thou art worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory, glory and honor,
Glory and honor and pow'r;
For thou hast created, hast all things created,
Thou hast created all things,
And for Thy pleasure they are created:
Thou art worthy, O Lord!

The nineteenth-century hymn "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" is full of references to light, to the victory of God, and to his adoring angels. "Worthy Is the Lamb," written by Don Wyrzten in 1973, expresses praise to Christ in the words of Rev 5:12. Horatius Bonar's text "Blessing and Honor and Glory" is inspired by Rev 5:13 and ends with praise to the Lamb who was slain. Charles Wesley's 1744 hymn "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim" also reflects the scenes and words of Revelation. It appears that hymn writers both ancient and modern have found inspiration in Revelation nearly equal to that in the Psalms.

And at the conclusion of all this worship in song, "the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshiped" (5:14). Amen—truly—yes, this is no

period at the end of a prayer. "Amen" in the New Testament is not the end of anything; it is a resounding affirmation. The apostle Paul indicates that it is connected with the affirmation God has made in Christ: "For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen,' to the glory of God" (2 Cor 1:20). God is truly Lord of all—yes! Christ is thoroughly worthy—yes! We find the center of our lives at the throne of God—yes! God will help us live our throne-centered lives in this world. Amen.

Christians through the centuries have learned much about worship from the study of Revelation. It shows us not only the deeper reality of Christian worship but also the dire consequences of the worship of the beast, or Satan. In writing this book, John indicates that worship is not just a matter of taste or human inclination, it is a matter of eternal life and death. The difference, of course, lies not so much in how we worship; it lies, rather, in whom we worship.⁷

In fact, Revelation's presentation of evangelism appears to be the calling of human beings to the correct worship of God.⁸

Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." (14:6–7)

We can learn much about worship from Revelation, but most important to our practice of worship is the centrality of God enthroned and

Christ victorious. Every song we sing, every prayer we utter, every sermon or communion meditation we offer, every act or gesture of our services should indicate our consciousness that God is on the throne of our lives and Christ has won the victory for us. To the extent that our acts of worship deny that and call attention to ourselves, we worship something other than God and put ourselves in jeopardy. To the extent that our acts of worship reflect the Almighty on the throne of the universe and Jesus as our Savior, we worship not only as Revelation teaches but also with the saints who are in the throne room of God. That is the reality of Christian worship—a reality we are to actualize regularly as we gather with the saints. Amen!

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Notes

¹ All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ For a good discussion of this dialectic, see M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 108–11.

⁶ Eugene Peterson, 66.

⁷ See the contrast nicely drawn in David Peterson, "Worship in the Revelation to John," chap. 9 in *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 261–82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.