

New World, New Temple, New Worship: the Book of Revelation in the Theology and Practice of Christian Worship—Part 1

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Introduction

Revelation is lavish in its portrayal of worship. The verb προσκυνέω (*proskuneō*) ‘to worship’ is used twenty-four times. No other New Testament book uses it as frequently, and almost half of its New Testament occurrences are in Revelation. Furthermore, all the events of Revelation occur against the backdrop of Old Testament worship structures and objects, including the tree of life, tabernacle, temple, ark, scroll, lamp, incense and bowls. The drama itself deals with the most basic distinction—that between true and false worship. These initial observations clearly suggest that Revelation is critically important in understanding the biblical theology of worship.

Three main dangers arise in considering the theme of worship in Revelation. The first, simply, is to ignore the book’s relevance to the theology and practice of Christian worship.¹ The second danger is to use it only as a source of proof-texts which support, *inter alia*, Lord’s Day worship and sung praise, and thus miss the richness of Revelation’s theology of worship.² The third danger is that enthusiastic students of Revelation’s worship theology might ‘detect the reverberations of liturgy in the New Testament even where no liturgical note was originally struck’.³

This article uses a recent formulation of the preterist interpretation of Revelation in order to navigate around those dangers with the goal of discovering something of the treasures of the theology of worship in Revelation. This approach will, we believe, greatly enrich our understanding of the biblical theology of worship and also help inform current discussion about the nature and shape of Christian worship.

Various Accounts of Worship in Revelation

An extensive survey of the scholarly literature pertaining to the theme of worship in Revelation is integral to our thesis. Here we will outline various attempts to account for and explain this dominant theme. We will examine proposed sources and background influences on Revelation's portrayal of worship and then, making reference to the widely accepted emperor worship hypothesis, consider explanations of the book's theology of worship. Finally, we will consider suggestions for Revelation's rhetorical or narrative function within a liturgical context.

Proposed sources and background influences

Here, our focus is much broader than the source criticism which became so influential in the early twentieth century. Our interest lies in the various sources and influences on Revelation's portrayal of worship, namely (i) the Graeco-Roman context; (ii) contemporary Jewish and Christian practice; and (iii) the Old Testament background.

(i) Graeco-Roman sources

Those who stand in the tradition of R. H. Charles lay great emphasis on excavating and cataloguing Graeco-Roman sources.⁴ They reject early Christian liturgical practice as the dominant influence on Revelation and contend that the presentation of worship is shaped more by the rituals of the imperial cult and Hellenistic magic. So, for example, the crowned elders around a throne (ch. 4), being without parallel in Jewish literature, are understood to come from the ceremonial traditions of the twenty-four bodyguards at Domitian's court.⁵ Similarly, some explain Revelation's hymnic portions by appealing to the tragedies of the Greek theatre, where the chorus expressed the feelings and thoughts of the spectators as the drama unfolded.⁶

(ii) Contemporary Jewish and Christian practice

Here we consider the liturgical elements in then contemporary Jewish and Christian practice that could have had some bearing on Revelation. These include liturgies and practice (of the temple, synagogue and church) and apocalyptic literature (which was well known in Jewish and Christian circles in the first century). We distinguish between the use or adaptation of elements or ideas from pre-existing sources and the borrowing and replication of an overall liturgical structure.

(a) Elements and ideas**(1) Jewish elements and practice**

There are a variety of proposals among them the idea that the hymnic portions have their origin in the synagogue (e.g. 4:11; 11:15-18; 15:3-4).⁷ Also suggested is that the creator theme in chapter 4 is a transposition of the synagogue morning liturgy.⁸ More thematically, it is argued that the symbolism of Exodus, judgement and pilgrimage, all present in 'an ideal Feast of Tabernacles,' lies behind chapter 7.⁹

(2) The practice of the early church

Suggestions include: (1) The twenty-four elders reflect the presbytery seated around the bishop.¹⁰ (2) The letters draw on a minister admonishing, warning and inviting a catechumen (chs. 2-3).¹¹ (3) The unsealing of the scroll parallels the Old Testament reading.¹² (4) Revelation 5 is comparable to other hymnic texts and is evidence of a pre-existent liturgical formula to describe Christ's enthronement.¹³ Form-critical analysis of sections such as 1:4-5, 8b; 4:8b; 7:12, 15-17; 11:15, 17-18 and 19:5-8 reveals parallelism, reverent tone and grammatical peculiarities which suggest borrowing from pre-existing liturgies.¹⁴ Similarly, some detect parallels to the Odes of Solomon.¹⁵ (5) These liturgical sources may have been localised in Asia Minor.¹⁶ (6) Others suggest, on the basis of I Clement and the Didache, that these were the hymns from John's Eucharistic liturgy.¹⁷

(3) Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature

There are two pertinent observations. First, many of the common elements of apocalyptic literature are found, e.g. the tree of life, crown of life, hidden manna, new name, white raiment.¹⁸ The second is that the worship described follows Jewish and Christian apocalyptic by having a heavenly aspect.¹⁹ There was a widely-held belief that because the tabernacle and temple were copies of heaven (Exod. 25:8-9), there was a close correspondence between earthly and heavenly worship.²⁰ Consequently, the heavenly temple was a common theme in apocalyptic literature.²¹ A corresponding idea is seen in the Qumran community's belief that, as the faithful on earth, they participated with the angels in the worship of the heavenly temple.²²

(4) Eclecticism, drawing on a variety of sources

Various suggestions include the liturgical elements being drawn from an early Christian liturgy, itself taken from the synagogue liturgy but also conditioned by the imperial cult.²³ Others, less dogmatically, see Jewish and Christian

elements woven together,²⁴ accepting that our knowledge of the sources is too piecemeal to have much certainty.²⁵

(b) Whole liturgical patterns

(1) Christian Liturgies

Cullmann argues that John saw his visions on a ‘Lord’s Day’ in the context of a worship service.²⁶ Hence, ‘the whole Book of Revelation from the greeting of grace and peace in chapter 1:4 to the closing prayer: Come Lord Jesus, in chapter 22:20, and the benediction in the last verse, is full of allusions to the liturgical usages of the early community’.²⁷ It is suggested that Revelation follows the basic shape of the Eucharistic liturgy as Scripture, homily, prayer and Eucharist,²⁸ perhaps the paschal liturgy.²⁹

(2) Jewish Liturgy

Carrington argued that the structure of Revelation showed substantial similarities to the pattern of Old Testament temple liturgy,³⁰ in particular, that of the daily morning sacrifice. A high priest sacrificed a lamb at the temple and splashed its blood on the altar. Trumpets are sounded, the gate opens, the sacrifice is prepared, incense is offered, the victim is burned and then there is a sacrificial feast.

Similarly, Farrer believed Revelation to be a ‘continuous, hard-headed and systematic working out of Old Testament themes’ which ‘exhibited an extremely elaborate and varied cyclic pattern, both in the regular recurrence of themes, and in the form of their visionary presentation’. He argued that Revelation paralleled the Old Testament liturgical calendar, which began with Dedication and moved through Passover, Pentecost, New Year (Trumpets), and Tabernacles before returning to Dedication in Revelation 15. The cycle was then repeated a second time, returning to Dedication (ch. 22).³¹

(iii) The Old Testament background

In some ways the previous section is really a subset of this one because the Old Testament informed both Jewish and Christian liturgy and literature. Little additional information is needed because what we have already seen demonstrates the massive importance of the Old Testament. Many scholars have drawn attention to the pervasive use of the Old Testament in Revelation; here we highlight the particular influence of the Old Testament on Revelation’s

portrayal of worship. Brigg recognises the influence of apocalyptic and Qumran literature but he contends, as does Beale, that the dominant influence on John's portrayal of heavenly worship is the Old Testament.³² Ruiz believes this liturgical application of the Old Testament was done in a rather ad hoc way to create an "ongoing open-endedness" of meaning. However, Bauckham has demonstrated that John engaged in careful exegesis in order to make a distinct contribution to the New Testament's biblical theology.³³

Thus we have various hypotheses regarding the sources and influences which might underlie the theme of worship in Revelation. However, the presence of similarities proves little by itself since correlation is not causation. Guthrie gives wise counsel when he suggests that we examine the function of the worship scenes before drawing conclusions regarding the sources on which they might be based.³⁴ Beale likewise urges us to examine what pattern of worship John intends to give the churches before we try to identify his sources.³⁵

Theological Explanations

We begin with a number of proposals which examine the literary and theological function of John's description of heavenly worship. Examining John's purpose should give us criteria to weigh the merits of the suggestions outlined above and so better understand the background to Revelation.

(i) The Pattern of Heavenly Worship

John may have recorded the heavenly worship as a pattern to give to the church. Thus John received, in a Moses-like manner, the heavenly pattern of worship that the church on earth should reflect. This enables worship to be done 'on earth as in heaven'.³⁶

(ii) Participating in Heavenly Worship

John may have been explaining the very nature of Lord's Day worship i.e., worship takes place both on earth and in heaven.³⁷ Angels are present because the church gathers around the heavenly throne.³⁸ John, though exiled from the people with whom he previously worshipped, was not that far away from them because they met in heaven which was much closer than they realised.³⁹ This means that as the church on earth gathers, the Spirit breaks into our world and sweeps us into the kingdom that is, even now, coming down from heaven.⁴⁰

Thus, simple and outwardly unimpressive gatherings actually have salvation–historical significance because, in worship, future realities are realised to such a degree that worshippers gain a foretaste of what is to come.⁴¹

(iii) Countering the emperor cult

Perhaps the most prevalent idea is that John wrote to strengthen churches to resist the emperor cult. John therefore set out the radical distinction between the true worship of God and the lamb, and the demonic worship of the dragon and the beast in the emperor cult.

This view assumes that a new form of emperor worship had ‘become widespread in Domitian’s day’,⁴² Christians who refused to participate were persecuted. Moffatt contends that this form of emperor worship could not be found earlier than Domitian.⁴³ Similarly, Charles argues that the antagonism presupposed in Revelation was not present until the closing years of Domitian’s reign.⁴⁴

On this view, John’s ‘urgent challenge’ to churches is that they engage in true worship and not in its ‘pseudo and pretentious counterpart’.⁴⁵ John enables Christians to resist by showing how deceptive present appearances of power can be.⁴⁶ In fact, ‘participation or non-participation becomes determinative of eschatological destiny’.⁴⁷ John constructs ‘counter-definitions of reality’ to help Christians take their stand against the power, oppression and idolatrous ideology of Rome. Revelation encourages Christians by giving them ‘a glimpse of the final blessedness of God’s people’.⁴⁸

Peterson observes that emperor worship is more than mere cultic activity; ultimately, it is a matter of allegiance and life orientation.⁴⁹ Further, noting that *proskyneo* is not applied to what Christians do here and now but rather to the activity of heavenly beings or those redeemed from the earth, he concludes that true worship in the present, unlike the imperial cult, has no cultic associations or implications. Instead, it involves ‘giving proper allegiance to God and the Lamb in everyday situations’ and thus, ‘nothing is specifically said about the function and purpose of Christian gathering’.⁵⁰ Consequently, the heavenly worship scenes have two functions: (i) they provide a foretaste of what is to come; and (ii) they model the complete allegiance to, and acknowledgment of, God that is characteristic of true worship.

Having seen three major proposals as to John's theological intentions, we now consider accounts of the worship language in Revelation offered by rhetorical and narrative criticism. These proposals stress the rhetorical performative function of Revelation.

Functional analysis

In biblical studies, the older method which laboured to discover the *Sitz im Leben* of the liturgical and hymnic material has been eclipsed by a stress on rhetorical and functional criticism. Two accounts are pertinent to our study.

(i) The creation of a new narrative world

Narrative analysis suggests that Revelation, like all literature, creates its own world or 'symbolic universe'. Barr believes Revelation was intended to be read aloud in a ritual setting. There, the implied audience, i.e. the seven churches, heard the gospel presented in the 'oral performance' of three short dramas and embarked on a 'fantastic journey' which transported them to another reality where the kingdom is experienced.⁵¹ This involves a process of 'symbolic transformation' whereby the symbols with which the kingdom was experienced were reversed and infused with new meaning. Specifically, 'symbols of violence [were transformed] into symbols of suffering'.⁵² As such, the worshipping community and their world were decisively changed; they now lived in a new world because they understood their world differently. Commitment to Jesus was strengthened by the sort of catharsis, or clarification, that comes from seeing a lamb conquer and victims become victors.

Fiorenza believes John uses liturgy to do combat with Rome over matters of power, injustice and marginality. With such a political analysis, Revelation becomes a work of persuasion and motivation intended to enable the harassed and exploited to embark on a new way of seeing reality. She describes how the visions and hymns of worship have an imaginative and social function, *viz.*, rather like a Greek chorus, they put things in perspective by providing 'a poetic-rhetorical construction of an alternative symbolic universe'.⁵³

(ii) Transformative and therapeutic power

Others describe the performative character of the work, i.e. it was meant to be heard by an audience that came together to be transformed. The public reading of Revelation was 'effectual' in the sense that the 'text did something' to its hearers.⁵⁴

In her sociological study, Collins argues that there is no specific evidence of persecution in Asia Minor. Thus, ‘the crisis’ was unperceived by the congregations to whom this itinerant prophet ministered. John warns of the subtle dangers of Rome and calls Christians to a social, political and economic radicalism in which they withdraw into a monastic community of worship.⁵⁵ John uses myths, e.g. the Babylonian combat myth, to detach and distance his community from Rome,⁵⁶ thereby bringing about a therapeutic ‘process of catharsis’ through which emotional and psychological control are gained.

Gager believes Revelation was designed to be read aloud in worship to console Christians severely oppressed by imperial power by giving them a fleeting glimpse or foretaste of the relief that is to come. This is an example of mythic therapy in which the recital of myth eliminates time and causes the future to symbolically inhabit the present.⁵⁷ This is ‘the ideal time’ where the duality of present and future is transcended in the ‘experience of millennial bliss as a living reality’.

To Thompson, liturgy has the transformative power to realise the eschatological realities it signifies. He observes two distinct kinds of material, namely, eschatological dramatic narrative and liturgical recital.⁵⁸ Then, focusing on the juxtaposition of these cultic and eschatological sections, he proposes that the gap between future and present is bridged by the liturgical material. The kingdom of God is realised in the liturgical material ‘prior to the realization of these realities in the dramatic narrative form’.⁵⁹ The worshipping community celebrates eschatological realities by affirming the presence on earth of another heavenly world.

Evaluation

Much of our evaluation of sources and function must wait until we have discussed our interpretation of Revelation, after which we will be in a position to explain why worship is described the way it is. In particular, we will be able to account for the influence of the Old Testament, Jewish and Christian liturgies and literature. We will also be able to assess the function of Revelation.

It is impossible to overstate the widespread acceptance of the Domitian emperor worship hypothesis, held by such eminent evangelical scholars as Barnett, Bauckham, DeSilva, Morris, Peterson, and Poythress. However, we

will argue that there is little firm evidence that a new form of emperor worship appeared in the 90s. If this is correct, the hypothesis has been significantly overstated and the date in the 90s is arbitrary and could, in fact, be earlier. If so, the way is open to a new understanding of the worship language in Revelation, one that takes account of the sources and background influences already discussed. In the following chapter we shall present a positive case for an early date in the 60s. This will immediately rule out some later sources as influences on John, and instead raise the possibility that these Christian liturgies might have reflected, rather than shaped, the teaching of Revelation. It will also challenge such critics as Collins and Thompson who believe John to be dealing with a largely unperceived crisis in the 90s. To this end, we will analyse the nature of the imperial cult, particularly as found in Asia Minor.

Challenging the emperor worship hypothesis

First, we note that the evidence shows the imperial cult to be widespread from the time of Augustus. Then we shall show that there seems to be no evidence of a new form of emperor worship emerging under Domitian.

(i) Emperor worship from Augustus

Augustus' politically-driven imperial cult was present in Asia Minor from 29 B.C. through architecture, sculpture, inscriptions and coins. Posthumously, Augustus was proclaimed, like Julius before him, *Divus Augustus*. Subsequently, Gaius insisted on divine honours and Claudius was deified posthumously. Many of the elements of the imperial cult are present in the record of Nero. Although he did not officially seek divine honours in his title, the evidence suggests that he demanded divine honours while still alive.⁶⁰

Domitian insisted on divine honours during his reign, referring to himself as *dominus et deus noster*. According to Suetonius, he decreed that he be addressed 'in no other way'.⁶¹ In Asia Minor, Ephesus had a temple dedicated to Domitian.

(ii) No new form of emperor worship emerged under Domitian

Those who contend that the events of the 90s precipitated the writing of Revelation must take into account the presence of the cult in Asia Minor from the time of Augustus, and explain how the manifestation of the cult changed under Domitian. They argue that a new form of the cult emerged in the 90s that was antagonistic towards non-participants. This solution, however, is

problematic. First, there is no evidence of legally enforced emperor worship before Trajan and secondly, the degree of Christian persecution under Domitian is debated.

Wright notes that non-Jewish persecution of Christians came in a fierce but brief spell under Nero and possibly, ‘despite frequent scholarly assertions’, under Domitian.⁶² A number of late date advocates do not even attempt to use the Domitianic hypothesis to bolster their case, e.g. Swete, Charles and Moffatt.⁶³ Sweet discourages making any reference to it.⁶⁴ Ladd describes how, despite his own conclusion, ‘there is no evidence that during the last decade of the first century there occurred any open and systematic persecution of the church’.⁶⁵ Fuller believes the only evidence for Domitianic persecution is from Revelation.⁶⁶ Morris, similarly, cannot find external corroboration to support the Domitianic hypothesis he uses.⁶⁷ Van Daalen concurs that there is ‘no evidence that there was any persecution under Domitian’.⁶⁸ Collins and Thompson go as far as to develop their arguments from the conviction that no persecution occurred under Domitian, and therefore the crisis was largely unperceived.⁶⁹

What external evidence there is comes solely from later Christian sources from the middle of the second century.⁷⁰ The only non-Christian source is Casius Dio (A.D.150–235), whose historiography has been questioned.⁷¹ He recorded that Domitian’s cousin, Falvius Clemens, was executed and his wife exiled because of their ‘atheism’ which Dio understands to be Judaism.⁷² It has been suggested that Dio failed to distinguish the quite complex relationship that existed between Jews and Christians in the early 90s.⁷³ This is unlikely because Dio was writing in the late second century and those were the days of the great Christian apologists.

Alternatively, emphasis is put on Suetonius’s reference to the heavy taxation of the Jews under Domitian because this could be a confused reference to Christians.⁷⁴ Given that we will argue for the suitability of early date under Nero, it is striking that Suetonius appeared to praise the Neronian persecution of Christians and yet could not commend Domitian for such persecution.

Thus, the cult was widespread from Augustus and there is little evidence of the alleged persecution being tied to non-participation under Domitian. Remarkably, some like Morris realise this but, in an essentially circular

argument, maintain their position. Others, like Tenney, present a modified version and suggest that Christians suffered heavy taxation, not violent persecution, due to their non-participation.⁷⁵ Mounce regards the picture of universal enforcement of the imperial cult as ‘a forecast rather than a descriptive account of the conditions under Domitian’.⁷⁶

Consequently, the presupposed ‘very specific social and historical situation’⁷⁷ on which a number of writers base their account of the worship language in Revelation is, in fact, highly dubious because of insufficient evidence. This applies equally to those who argue for a new form of persecution emerging under Domitian and others, like Collins and Thompson, who argue that the crisis was unperceived. The Domitianic emperor worship thesis has gained currency primarily through repetition. The limited external evidence suggests the existence of the emperor cult in Asia Minor throughout the first century.

In the next section we will proceed to outline our understanding of the worship language in Revelation. This account will demonstrate Revelation’s theology of worship and will explain the background influences and function of the book.

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ENDNOTES

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23. L. Mowry, "Rev. 4-5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71 (1952): 79. Mowry understands those eclectic elements to have been woven into a Christian liturgy, p. 84. Thus, chs. 4-5 are understood to be structured

- as follows: Invitation (4:1), singing of the Trisagion (4:8), praise sung to God the Creator by the choir and congregation as the elders prostrate themselves (4:10-11), Scripture reading after the reception of the scroll (5:1-7), prayer with praise to Christ the slain lamb (5:8-12), Doxology to God and Christ (5:13), choral Amen (5:14).
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61. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars: Domitian* (13).
62. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 374.
63. K. L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, p. 287.
64. J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM, 1979), pp. 24-25.
65. G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 8.
66. R. H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1966), p. 187.
67. L. Morris, *Revelation*, p. 36.
68. D. H. van Daalen, *A Guide to Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1986), p. 3.
69. A. Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), pp. 69-73; and L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: OUP, 1990), pp. 95-115.
70. K. L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, p. 288 cites Lactantius, *The Death of the Persecutors* 3, who describes Melito of Sardis telling Marcus Aurelius that Nero and Domitian assailed the church.
71. A. A. Bell, "The date of John's Apocalypse: the evidence of some Roman historians reconsidered," *New Testament Studies* 25 (1978): 94-95. Two thirds of Dio's work survives only in the form of an eleventh century epitome and a twelfth century summary. The translator E. Cary, *Dio's Roman History*, Vol. I p. xxiii, describes the epitome as 'very carelessly' made. Furthermore, as Rossi pointed out, the historiography appears to be more polemical and less accurate than that of Tacitus and Suetonius.
72. A. A. Bell, 'Date of John's Apocalypse', pp. 95-96. M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 45 cites Dio's report: 'Domitian killed, along with many others, Flavius Clemens while he was consul, even though he was his cousin and married to one of his relations, Domitilla. Both were accused of atheism, on which charge many others who had turned towards Jewish customs were also condemned; of these only a few were put to death while others were deprived of their worldly goods. Domitilla was only banished to Pandataria.'
73. M. Sordi, *The Christians in the Roman Empire*, pp. 48-50.
74. Suetonius, *Domitian* 12, p. 312. 'Domitian' s agents collected the tax on Jews with a peculiar lack of mercy; and took proceeding not only against those who kept their Jewish origins a secret in order to avoid the tax, but against those who lived as Jews without professing Judaism.' T. E. Page (ed.), *Suetonius: The Lives of the Caesars*,

pp. 366-67 makes the editorial comment that this may refer to Christians. R. Graves (trans.), *The Twelve Caesars*, p. 349 suggests, in an editorial comment, that these are loose adherents of Judaism.

75. M. C. Tenney, *New Testament Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 324: 'There is no specific record in the Roman historians of a wholesale concerted persecution of Christians in this period, but there can be little doubt that the social and religious atmosphere of the empire was becoming increasingly unfavorable and that in some localities Christians were brought to trial and martyred for their faith.'
76. R. H. Mounce, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 33.
77. D. Peterson, *Engaging with God*, p. 262.

The book of Revelation provides some of the keenest insights in Scripture concerning the "big picture" of work. Yet it is a tough nut to crack, not only because of its intrinsic difficulty but because of the myriad interpretations that have grown up around the book. If the world is simply an illusion separating us from the real life of heaven, work in the world will necessarily be seen as more or less a complete waste of time. If, by contrast, the world is the good creation of God, the prospects for meaningful work become more hopeful. Revelation encourages us to look to the ultimate destination of the New Jerusalem in the midst of an often bumpy road. There is also perhaps an implicit challenge in 6:6 to avoid exploiting the vulnerable in the time of need.