WAMT: New Testament Survey

Eschatology and Revelation
What Are We Waiting For?

Christian hope is the hope:

- For the return of Jesus Christ to finish the project of reconciling all creation to God.
- That evil will be destroyed and sin will disappear
- That there will be judgement for those who have done evil and vindication for the righteous ones
- That pain will disappear
- That creation will be renewed
- For a just ruler
- For harmony in creation
- That war and conflict will be no more
- That death does not have the last word, but that there is a “word after that,” i.e. resurrection of the dead.
What are we Waiting For?

Biblical visions of the **Age to Come** or the **Eschaton** are not intended to give us literal, formulaic pictures of “what comes next” or how it gets here.

Rather, they are the cumulation of various **expressions of hope** in what God is doing.
The Book of Revelation

- Probably written by John (same as the Gospel) while in exile on the island of Patmos (off the coast of Asia Minor).
- Written at the end of the first century, around 95AD.
- Written during a period of growing persecution against the Christians. Judaism and Christianity had split ways; the Roman Empire no longer recognized Christians as part of the ancient religion of Judaism (and Romans don’t like new religions!)
- John tells about his vision of Christ, God’s rule over the cosmos, worship in a heavenly temple, and the defeat of evil.
- Falls into the genre category of apocalyptic literature.
What is Apocalyptic Literature?

- **Apocalypse** means “revelation”: *apocalyptic literature* “pulls back the curtain” on the cosmic stage to show what is really going on behind the scenes.

- Apocalyptic is a *literature of hope* for those under oppression.
  - Stems from times/situations where the outlook is not good for the people.
  - Reinforces the idea of that God is in charge of the whole universe
  - Encourages the people to persevere through their trials in assurance that God will ultimately be victorious.

- Apocalyptic is a *literature of resistance* against an oppressive system.

- Apocalyptic *critiques* the present in order to *give hope* for the future.
What is Apocalyptic Literature?

• Looks to the future in hope that God will set things right, but speaks to the current situation. Apocalyptic is not “fortune telling” or “foreseeing the end of the world.”

• “Propaganda”: the author wants his audience to view history and the present in the way that he sees it.

• Uses lots of symbolism and imagery, like a political cartoon.

(for more, check out Michael Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly)
ROLL IT OUT!!

OBAMA CARE

ROLL IT BACK!!
I'm saving you from drowning!

CRIMEA

RUSSIA
Some Symbols and Imagery in Revelation

- Babylon = Rome, Lamb = Christ (sacrifice imagery), Sea = Chaos, Light = Goodness
- The whole book takes up the imagery of *the Jewish Temple and Jewish Temple worship* to show that what is going on in the temple on earth is only a small reflection of what is going on in God’s heavenly temple:
  - trumpets start the worship service
  - seals = opening the seals on the Torah to read
  - trumpets = move to next part of liturgy
  - bowls = bowls of libation poured out on the altar
  - interspersed with hymns and songs
Some Symbols and Imagery in Revelation

- Numbers are almost *always* symbolic...not to be taken literally.
- Use of Old Testament imagery:
  - River of Life: looks back to Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 40ff.)
  - Tree of Life: looks back to the Garden of Eden
  - “There will be no light, for God is their light”: looks to Isaiah 2
- Scroll = a legal will (the one who opens it is the one who’s job it is to carry out its instructions; those who cannot carry it out have no business opening it; *no one is worthy/able until the Lamb!*
Ways of Interpreting Revelation

**Futurist**: Revelation points to the future or “the end of the world,” most events still await fulfillment.

**Historicist**: Revelation points to different stages of church history (e.g. Martin Luther thought that the Beast was the Catholic Church during the Reformation)

**Preterist**: Revelation represents events from the first century, has all already been fulfilled.

**Idealist**: Revelation represents “eternal realities,” answers the ongoing problems of Empire, suffering, disease, evil. Does not correlate to any historical events.

**Eclectic (combination)**: Revelation addresses particular historical events from the 1st century but also the larger problem of “empire” in general.

**Not typically endorsed by biblical scholars**
5 “Strategies” for Understanding Revelation

From Michael Gorman’s Reading Revelation Responsibly:

1. Recognize that the central and centering image of Revelation is the Lamb that was slaughtered.

2. Remember that Revelation was first of all written by a first-century Christian for first-century Christians using first-century literary devices and images.

3. Abandon so-called literal, linear approaches to the book as if it were history written in advance, and use an interpretive strategy of analogy rather than correlation.

4. Focus on the book’s call to public worship and discipleship.

5. Place the images of death and destruction in Revelation within the larger framework of hope.
What Revelation Is and Is Not

• It is NOT a roadmap to the end of the world.
• It is NOT a secret code to be unlocked.
• It is NOT telling us that the world is a ticking time bomb that we need to leave before it blows up.
• It is NOT meant to point to or correlate to specific events in our day and age.
What Revelation Is and Is Not

• It IS a message of hope in the midst of oppression.
• It IS a vision of God’s *eschatological* (end-all) reign.
• It IS assurance that God is in charge and is redeeming creation.
• It IS speaking specifically and symbolically to the Christians of the first century.
• It IS telling us that there is evil lurking behind the Roman Empire (and subsequently behind *all* empires who use oppressive means to benefit themselves while holding others down!)
What Revelation Is and Is Not

• The words “antichrist” and “rapture” do not appear in Revelation.

• *Antichrist* is *anybody* who stands in opposition to the way of Jesus (1 John 2:22).

• The idea of the *rapture* does not appear in the Bible!
The Book of Revelation

• Primarily a message of hope!
• Speaks to the specific situation of oppression and persecution in the first century, but also speaks to the ongoing realities of evil and oppression in our world.
• Looks forward in hope to God’s eradication of all evil and God’s reign over the whole cosmos.
• It is another vision of the eschaton...not a formulaic picture, but an expression of a people’s hopes.
The Book of Revelation

What was the situation John was writing to?

As Christian individuals and communities in Asia Minor interacted with family members, friends, business associates, and public officials who did not share their conviction that ‘Jesus is Lord’…these believers were faced with hard questions and decisions. Should they continue to participate in social activities that have a pagan…religious character? This would include most activities: watching or participating in athletic and rhetorical contests; buying and eating meat in the precincts of pagan temples; and frequenting trade guilds, clubs, and events in private homes, each with their meetings, drinking parties, and banquets. They would even have wondered, ‘Should we or can we go to pagan temples to do our banking or purchase meat? Should we acknowledge the sovereignty of the emperor when asked to do so at a public event in the precincts of his temple, or at another of the many events in his honor?’
Some believers continued to participate in such activities, while others did not. It was the latter group that created serious social conflict. Their confession of Jesus’ lordship and their separation from normal Greco-Roman religious, social, and political activity was seen by pagan non-believers...as unpatriotic and atheistic. Some of them were harassed unofficially, but some were likely excluded from guilds and others investigated by government officials. At least one of them (John) was exiled as punishment for his behavior. He says that his experience was not isolated, but part of a larger event of testimony and persecution. At least one of the faithful was actually killed, either by mob or by official action: Antipas of Pergamum (2:13). There may have been others.
The Book of Revelation

These various sorts of localized persecution instilled fear in the Christian assemblies, resurrecting memories of the emperor Nero’s persecutions of the 60’s. This natural fear led, in some assemblies, to increased accommodation with pagan practices in order to avoid the fate of John and Antipas. These people, understandably, did not want to ‘make waves.’ But John, living in exile as one probably accused of practicing and provoking atheistic sedition, that is (as John himself saw it), one who had borne faithful public witness both to Jesus and like Jesus, was given a series of messages to those churches. The common element in each message was a call to uncompromising faithfulness… John’s call to faithfulness was tempered by the realistic expectation of increased persecution in the near future, but it was also buttressed by the certain hope of participating in the new heaven and earth that will follow from this temporary persecution. The new heaven and earth are indeed the culmination of God’s plan, not only for the people of God, but for the cosmos. It was promised by the biblical prophets and guaranteed by Jesus’ death and exaltation, and it is set to arrive as soon as the evil and blasphemous empire is judged and removed.
The Book of Revelation

The Situation:

1. Churches are under threat of persecution if they don’t participate in imperial cult.
2. Churches are under persecution by Jewish synagogues after Christianity and Judaism split ways.
3. Dangers of false teaching and complacency.
The structure of Revelation is a “heavenly worship service” in the pattern of the Jewish Temple liturgy, mixed with images of God’s cosmic battle with evil:

- At dawn, ashes from the altars were cleared and candles on menorah prepared (Rev. 1:12-20)
- Then, the sacrificial Lamb was slaughtered and its blood poured out at the base of the alter (Rev. 5:6-9)
- Reading of a blessing, the ten commandments, the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9) and other Torah texts read from the scroll (Rev. 5:2-7, 6:1-8:1).
- Meanwhile, a procession of priests walked from the inner court through the gate (Rev. 4:1) into the holy place to make the incense offerings and pray in silence (Rev. 8:1-5)
- The burnt offering was made, the temple trumpets were blown, the cups of libation were poured out, the Levites broke out in song and music, and the people prostrated themselves in homage to God (Rev. 5:9-14, 14:3-4, 15:3-4).
**Structure of Revelation**

- Part 1: Seven Pastoral-Prophetic Messages from the Risen Lord (chs. 1-3)
- Part 2: The Central and Centering Vision of God and the Lamb that was Slain (chs. 4-5)
- Part 3: Visions of the Judgement of God (chs. 6-20)
- Part 4: Final Vision of Hope Fulfilled: New Heaven, New Earth, New City (chs. 21-22)
Structure of Revelation

Part 1: Seven Pastoral-Prophetic Messages from the Risen Lord (chs. 1-3)

• Shows two sides of the curtain:
  • Begins with “behind the scenes” vision of risen Christ among the seven churches. Christ is present to the churches, in control, keeping witness burning.
  • Letters speak to the “historical” side of the curtain. Speaks into the historical situation of the churches, calls them to faithful witness in the face of persecution and temptation to accommodate to the Romans.
• Letters include commendation, condemnation, challenge, and promise.
• Seven cities form a “circuit” that a messenger could have run.
Structure of Revelation

Part 2: The Central and Centering Vision of God and the Lamb that was Slain (chs. 4-5)

- Two visions of how God defines power: power is creative, power is redemptive.
- Images mimic imperial courts: “circles” make kings the “center of the universe”.
- Sea represents chaos, death, sin, monsters…but here the sea is “glassy”. God has undone the chaos brought about by sin.
- Scroll is legal document: only the “executor” (the one who is able to carry out what is written) is able to open the scroll. Only the lamb is capable of carrying it out!
- Slaughtered lamb is the central image through which we need to read the rest of the book!
Part 3: Visions of the Judgement of God (chs. 6-20)

- Three cycles of judgements: seals, trumpets, bowls. Should be read as cyclical/parallel rather than sequential.
- Interludes talk about God’s response to sin.
- Judgements escalate throughout the vision. Bowls have a sense of finality.
- Rider on horse has already won the war. Not through violence, but through sacrifice. The blood is his own! His weapon is his word!
Structure of Revelation

Part 4: Final Vision of Hope Fulfilled: New Heaven, New Earth, New City (chs. 21-22)
• Not the destruction of our world, but its transformation: culture of death replaced by culture of life, beast by lamb. *Christian hope is not escape by renewal and fulfillment!*
• Boundary between heaven/earth is permanently removed: God’s glory and presence is *everywhere!* Thus, the absence of all that is anti-god.
• Inspires us to:
  • *worship:* praise and honor to God and Lamb for present and future salvation.
  • *mission:* embodying eschatological values now, remaining faithful even to death.
  • *prophecy:* naming and speaking against all that which is at odds with God.
  • *hope:* recognizing that new creation comes in God’s time, not through our effort.
Structure of Revelation

Characters:
- Beast from the Sea: Roman Empire
- Beast from the Earth: Kingdoms who align themselves with Rome
- Harlot: economic exploitation
- Dragon: evil that lurks behind and controls it all!

How are these both historical and transcendent truth?
Revelation and Ethics

On the Violence of Revelation:

1. “The cries for divine judgement and justice, and the celebration of the same when it occurs... should be seen not only as expressions of normal human emotions, but also as cathartic and God-centered alternative to the more base sentiment of ‘taking justice into our own hands.’ The cry for judgment here is ‘established in its proper context, the act of worship.’ By expressing, in worship, first their anger and then their gratitude, the saints affirm the basic theological and ethical stance of Revelation: that the role of the church is to pray for and bear witness to God’s justice, not to take up arms against injustice. This is not the same as inaction, much less apathy. Indeed, it is action that got those who are speaking in these texts [Rev. 6:9-11, 18:20, 19:1-4] where they are — into heaven by means of martyrdom.” (Gorman, RRR, 156)
On the Violence of Revelation:

2. “These are not really cries for, or celebrations of, vengeance. Vengeance is self-centered… but these texts are ultimately centered on God and on others, especially on a world that has been greatly harmed by the injustice of the imperial perpetrators.”

3. “It is very important for those who have little or no direct experience of injustice not to criticize those who cry out for, and then celebrate, the justice of God… What some of us need is not to question the cries of the oppressed but to feel more fully the realities of injustice, especially when it is perpetrated by the Babylons of our own day.”