

APOCALYPSE *and* ALLEGIANCE

Worship, Politics, and Devotion
in the **Book of Revelation**

J. Nelson Kraybill



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To my daughter Andrea,
visionary artist and
intrepid follower of the Lamb

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Introduction

Worship Is Political

Not long after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, I received an unsettling letter from Trevor, a college friend whom I had not seen for twenty-five years. In our youth we both were persuaded by Jesus' call to peacemaking and love of enemies. But the church Trevor attended in 2001 was not bound to nonviolence, and people there were reeling from a double loss in the terrorist attacks. Among passengers on the plane that plunged into the Pentagon was the granddaughter of a woman from Trevor's congregation. And Todd Beamer, who helped to organize a passenger revolt on the plane that went down in Pennsylvania, was a friend of the pastor. The trauma of these tragedies and fear of further terrorism triggered a shift in Trevor's ethics and allegiance.

In his letter, Trevor described a worship service at his congregation on the Sunday after the attacks:

The Christian flag was at the front of the church. As we sang "God Bless America," the newest mother in the congregation brought the US flag forward in a funeral march—one step per two beats. I have not felt that filled with the Holy Spirit nor had tears streaming down my face at any service in my memory as I did during that one. When the US flag joined the Christian flag at the front of the church, it looked exactly right. I vowed not to make an issue of whether the national flag should stand at the front of the church as I had at a previous congregation.

Explaining that he no longer held to the nonviolent ideals of his youth, Trevor wrote:

I have always felt that the “turn the other cheek” lesson of the gospel was a lesson against vengeance. As a Christian, there is no room in my religion for making war to gain vengeance. Making war to prevent the further senseless slaughter of my countrymen is perfectly justified, however. If my identity as an American makes me a target, I have an obligation to defend myself, my family, and my neighbors. By choosing to massively attack innocent people, the perpetrators have lost any right to have their point of view considered by civilized people. Whatever happens to them now is their just due, the morality of which needs no further consideration or soul-searching on my part.

Symbols Help Persuade

Many factors—including anger, fear, and shock—must have played into Trevor’s shift of attitude toward violence and political allegiance. But what stands out in events leading to his change of conviction is the significant role of *symbol* at each stage. Terrorists struck the World Trade Center (a symbol of economic might) and the Pentagon (a symbol of military power). The perpetrators had also apparently intended to attack the United States Capitol building (a symbol of political power) but were thwarted by a passenger revolt.

Symbols featured prominently in the worship service Trevor described. A young mother (a symbol of new life) carried the American flag (a symbol of loyalty to nation) through a worshipping congregation and placed it beside the cross (a symbol of Jesus’ suffering love; fig. I.1) on a Christian flag.

This array of symbols represents forces of awesome power. There is the power of religious fundamentalism that precipitated the death of three thousand innocent people on September 11. There is the “shock and awe” power of retaliatory wars that brought death to thousands in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Christian flag at Trevor’s church carries its own powerful symbol: the cross



Fig. I.1. What does it mean when Christians in the United States fly the Christian flag in a position subordinate to the national flag?

of Jesus, instrument of political execution through which God has brought salvation to the world. From start to finish in this story, people with competing worldviews have used *symbol* or *symbolic acts* to mark allegiance and justify deeds of enormous consequence.

When Trevor rejoiced to see the national flag and the Christian flag joined in worship, was he giving allegiance both to Jesus and to country? Did one loyalty trump the other? Should Christians, citizens of the global kingdom of God, even think of their identity and allegiance in national terms? What larger spiritual forces do these symbols represent?

Revelation Uses Symbol to Build Allegiance

These are important questions, and Christians appropriately turn to Jesus and the early church for guidance in responding. John of Patmos, author of the book of Revelation, provides a constellation of images and narratives that help us understand how ideologies shape the world. Revelation makes abundant use of symbols, and John understands how these forge political and spiritual identity. In particular, Revelation highlights the way worship, with its reliance on symbol, expresses and shapes allegiance. The last book of the Bible is not a catalog of predictions about events that would take place two thousand years later. Rather, it is a projector that casts archetypal images of good and evil onto a cosmic screen. These images first of all speak to realities of the author's era. But Revelation also serves as a primer on how good and evil interact in every generation.

The central political reality in the author's day—the late first century—was the indomitable Roman Empire and its “divine” emperors. The pressing issue for John's readers was how Christians, who gave their highest loyalty to Jesus, should conduct themselves in a world where economic and political structures assumed that everyone would worship the emperor. While no Western nation has outright ruler worship today, we do have political, military, and economic powers to which millions give unquestioned allegiance.

John championed the same hope for Christ's return that animates the church today, but his vision does not predict specific political, cultural, or natural events of the twenty-first century. He received his vision in the first-century Mediterranean context, and symbols in his work relate primarily to realities of that era. But the world he inhabited—the Roman Empire—and the symbolic universe his vision created have uncanny parallels to our circumstances today. Sin and death still work havoc, empires continue to rampage, and with John we await the liberation of all creation, which will obtain when Christ returns. In the meantime, what is the Spirit saying through Revelation to us about faithfulness to Jesus Christ in our world?



Fig. I.2. Emperor Nero, who expected to be venerated as a god.

The World Worships Nero

A spectacle organized by Emperor Nero (fig. I.2) in first-century Rome provides a glimpse of the political environment in which John wrote his vision. In AD 66, two years after Rome suffered a catastrophic fire, the emperor hosted a stupendous celebration. Tiridates, king of Armenia, visited the imperial capital. After journeying nine months by horseback, this wise man from the East¹ approached Rome with an entourage of three thousand Parthian horsemen.²

Rome was master of the world, and Tiridates made the long trek in order to align Armenia with the superpower in Italy. Armenia was contested territory between the dominions of Rome and Parthia (an empire centered in the region called Iran today). Although Tiridates himself was of Parthian blood, he wanted to become a client of Rome. Even before his visit to Italy, Tiridates had ceremonially placed his diadem on an image of Nero,³ knowing he would receive a crown back from the emperor when he reached Rome.

Nero appreciated the propaganda value of hosting Tiridates well and spent a staggering sum of money on the festivities—rumored to be 300,000 *sesterces* out of an annual imperial budget of 800,000.⁴ Tiridates arrived by chariot to find Rome decorated with torches and garlands. On the appointed day,

1. Tiridates was a member of the *magi*, the Zoroastrian priestly class.

2. Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 63.2.1.

3. *Ibid.* 62.23.3.

4. Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 227. Ancient authors vary in their estimates of the expenditure. Cassius (*Roman History* 63.2.2) says Nero spent 800,000 *sesterces* per day to bring Tiridates to Rome.



Fig. I.3. Ruins of the Roman Forum, where Nero received Tiridates of Armenia.

thousands of spectators pressed into the forum before dawn, dressed in white and carrying laurel branches. As the sun rose, Nero entered the forum (fig. I.3), accompanied by the Senate and the Praetorian Guard. Resplendent in purple, the emperor ascended a platform built for the occasion and took his seat on a throne.

Tiridates and his entourage processed toward the platform between two lines of heavily armed Roman soldiers. As he neared the platform, the Armenian knelt before Nero with hands clasped over his breast. At this gesture the great throng—including many on nearby rooftops—thundered approval so loudly that Tiridates momentarily feared for his life. Then the crowd fell silent, and the visitor addressed Nero:

Master, I am the descendant of Arsaces,⁵ brother of the kings of Vologeses and Pacorus, and your slave. I have come to you, my god, worshiping you as I do [the sun god] Mithra. The destiny you spin for me shall be mine, for you are my Fortune and my Fate.

Nero replied to Tiridates with equal flourish:

You have done well to come here in person, that meeting me face-to-face you might enjoy my grace. For what neither your father left you nor your brothers gave and preserved for you, this do I grant you. King of Armenia I now declare you, that both you and they may understand that I have power to take away kingdoms and to bestow them.⁶

5. Likely a reference to Artaxias (reigned 190–160 BC), founder of the Artaxiad Dynasty, which ruled the kingdom of Armenia for nearly two centuries.

6. Cassius, *Roman History* 63.5.2–3; in *Dio's Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, LCL 32 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 8:143–44. In this and subsequent quotations from English translations of ancient works, archaic forms of pronouns and verbs have been



Fig. I.4. In AD 65 Nero issued this *aureus* coin in anticipation of receiving King Tiridates at Rome, which would mark the end of Rome's territorial dispute with the Parthian empire over Armenia. The reverse of the coin (right) shows the temple of Janus at Rome with doors closed, a symbol that the empire was "at peace." (Used by permission of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., www.cngcoins.com)

With these formalities finished, Nero—self-proclaimed king of kings—invited Tiridates to the platform. The Armenian sat at Nero's feet, and the emperor placed a diadem on his head. Nero raised Tiridates with his right hand and kissed him. Festivities then moved to the newly gilded Theater of Pompey, with its purple awning and embroidered image of Nero as the sun god Apollo. From there Nero proceeded to the temple of Janus, where he ceremonially closed the doors, a traditional sign in Rome that warfare had ended (fig. I.4). Even rulers from distant lands worshiped Nero, and the world was at peace.

Our World Is Full of Ritual and Worship

The obsequious behavior of Tiridates before Nero would be distasteful to most people in the modern West. We are grateful that our societies do not treat rulers as divine and that no one must be a slave to political masters. John of Patmos also found the kind of scene that unfolded at the Roman Forum abhorrent. But before we dismiss such idolatry as a relic of the distant past, we might ponder habits and rituals of our own society. Is our culture really as free from idolatrous expressions as we would like to imagine? Or are the gods we worship so embedded within our culture that we fail to recognize them?

Writing a decade before the recent global economic crisis, theologian Harvey Cox declared that economic forces of "The Market" had become god in the West, displacing the role of traditional religions:

[For] all the religions of the world, however they differ from one another, the religion of The Market has become the most formidable rival, the more so because it is rarely recognized as a religion. The traditional religions and the religion of the global market . . . hold radically different views of nature. In Christianity and Judaism, for example, "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all that dwell therein." The Creator appoints human beings as stewards and gardeners but, as it were, retains title to the earth. . . .

rendered in modern English, British spellings have been changed to American, and texts have been made gender inclusive when that, arguably, was the intent of the author.

In The Market religion, however, human beings, more particularly those with money, own anything they buy and—within certain limits—can dispose of anything as they choose.⁷

Even when The Market became beastly, as in the global upheaval starting in 2008, most people submitted with little protest. We accepted poverty and unemployment as part of the free market. Companies that funded our retirement plans made huge profits by selling armaments or cigarettes around the world. Corporate executives earned hundreds of times what individual employees in their factories took home. We treated The Market, Cox said, as omnipotent (possessing all power), omniscient (having all knowledge), and omnipresent (existing everywhere). We learned on a day-to-day basis that The Market was “apprehensive,” “relieved,” “nervous,” or “jubilant.”

When The Market showed signs of turning beastly even on the middle class, economics professor and Nobel laureate Paul Krugman described a global “crisis of faith.”⁸ Banks that backed debt for millions of people failed, and credit crumbled. The word “credit” comes from the Latin *credere*—to believe or to trust—and the crisis pointed to the inadequacy of any credo whose object is other than God.⁹

In their book *The Gods That Failed*, British financial journalists Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson name twelve “governing spirits” that took the world economy into chaos. Peoples and nations of the world put their faith in deities ranging from globalization and privatization to speculation and excess.¹⁰ In language reminiscent of John’s Apocalypse, Elliot and Atkinson describe how the gods of The Market

promised us paradise if only we would obey and pamper their hero-servants and allow their strange titans and monsters to flourish. We did as they asked, and have placidly swallowed the prescriptions of the lavishly rewarded bankers, central bankers, hedge fund managers, and private equity tycoons, while turning a blind eye to the rampaging of the exotic derivatives, the offshore trusts, and the toxic financial instruments. . . . These gods have failed. It is time to live without them.¹¹

7. Harvey Cox, “The Market as God,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1999, 18–23.

8. *New York Times*, February 15, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/02/15/opinion/15krugman.html (accessed July 15, 2009).

9. See Adam Hamilton, “Faith, Hope, and the Credit Crisis,” *Sojourners*, December 2008, 7.

10. Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson, *The Gods That Failed: How Blind Faith in Markets Has Cost Us Our Future* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 12–21. The authors name twelve gods: globalization, communication, liberalization, privatization, competition, financialization, speculation, recklessness, greed, arrogance, oligarchy, and excess.

11. *Ibid.*, 271–72.

In addition to gods that have warped the world economy, we might also consider the spiritual dimension of advertising's obsession with sex, leisure, and retirement security, or the temptation for nations to trust in weapons. We need prophets such as John of Patmos to help us recognize idolatry and injustice and to show us life-giving ways to worship a God of justice and sure salvation.

Jews and Christians Are Voices of Dissent

When Tiridates crossed northern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) on his way to Rome, he probably was unaware of a small Jewish sect whose members had recently begun meeting in halls and homes across the region. Tiridates would have known about Jews, since they were a prominent minority in many cities of Asia Minor and had their own homeland in Palestine. But a generation before Tiridates traveled to Rome, a Jewish teacher named Paul had helped spawn a Jewish splinter group in the East called Christians. The inspiration for this movement was a Galilean peasant who had died on a Roman cross, a form of execution reserved for people foolish enough to threaten or disobey the empire. Christianity was a disconcerting spiritual and political movement that was becoming its own religion, spilling beyond the Jewish populations of eastern Mediterranean cities to penetrate diverse classes and ethnicities.

Judaism and its messianic offshoot, Christianity, sometimes baffled and irritated subjects of Rome. Christians and Jews were monotheists, worshipers of one God in a world that revered many. Conquered peoples in the ancient world were normally expected to make a shift of allegiance by accepting the gods of their new masters, and the Romans in turn incorporated numerous foreign deities into their pantheon. In a world of religious syncretism, Jewish and Christian notions of singular loyalty to one God seemed subversive and antisocial.

Not only did Jews and Christians reject the gods of the nations; they also objected to the growing practice of emperor worship. The emperor when Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus (27 BC–AD 14), was hailed as divine. Emperor worship gained momentum throughout the first century AD, becoming prominent especially in the reigns of Caligula (AD 37–41), Nero (AD 54–68), and Domitian (AD 81–96). The spread of emperor worship coincided with the birth and growth of the Christian church. The entire Mediterranean world—except the obstinate Jews and Christians—worshiped at the feet of the emperor.

If Tiridates of Armenia did not yet know about Christians, Nero certainly did. Not long before receiving Tiridates, Nero had blamed the devastating fire at Rome (AD 64) on followers of Jesus. As we soon will see, Nero apparently contrived the accusation when some of his subjects suspected that Nero himself had torched the city. Christians in Rome learned that Nero was

dangerous when he launched a fierce persecution against them as punishment for their alleged arson. It is likely that the apostles Peter and Paul both died in Nero's brief bloodbath.

A Prophet Takes on the Empire

Soon to meet his own violent death, Nero could not have imagined the revolutionary power of the embryonic Christian movement. But at the margin of his empire, a fearless Christian prophet named John would soon receive a vision that lampooned emperor worship and foresaw the collapse of the Roman Empire. The vision would identify allegiance as the defining spiritual issue of the day and condemn worship of the emperor as idolatry.

From his platform on the tiny Island of Patmos—like other islands to which Rome banished troublemakers—John the Seer used pen and parchment to take on the greatest political power of his day. Dismissing Rome as a harlot and its empire as a beast, he proclaims that only God and the Lamb are worthy to receive worship. John condemns popular expressions of allegiance to the empire as blasphemous and gives a glimpse of the true worship that should shape readers' lives:

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

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!” (Rev. 5:11–13)

Anyone familiar with court ceremonies of the Roman emperors would recognize the subversive subtext of John's vision. Like other early Christians, John calls Jesus “Lord,” using the exact title that emperors claimed. Revelation summons readers to life-encompassing worship that is an alternative to worship of emperor and empire. A litany early in John's vision says followers of the Lamb are a kingdom and priests serving our God. That is political language, calling followers of Jesus Christ to alternative allegiance and alternative identity.

Emperor worship and rituals of allegiance to empire pervaded politics, business, family, and social life in the Roman world. The first word of Revelation in the Greek text is *apocalypsis*, which means “unveiling.” John’s vision unveils the Roman Empire, showing it to have become a violent beast that usurps devotion belonging to God. Revelation also unveils the nature of divine love, made known by a Lamb that was slain. Humanity must choose between allegiance to the beast and allegiance to the Lamb.

Prophecy for the Author’s Time—and Ours

Revelation refers to itself as prophecy (Rev. 22:7), which can be confusing because modern English uses the terms “prophecy” and “prediction” interchangeably. But biblical prophecy often has more to do with spiritual insight into the writer’s immediate circumstances than with forecasts of the distant future. John’s vision gave insight into “what must soon take place,” in his era (1:1). The seer knew nothing of global warming, the Internet, or the United Nations. He wrote a scathing critique of political idolatry in the first-century Roman Empire, not an analysis of Al Qaeda or the inequities of modern globalization.

But just as the letters of the apostle Paul have become God’s Word for us today when the Holy Spirit breathes through them, so God uses Revelation to illuminate our theological and political landscape. Rather than starting with the expectation that Revelation will forecast events of our time, we should seek to understand the life setting of John and the believers to whom he addressed his book. With that background, we then can listen for what the Spirit is saying to the churches about faithfulness to Jesus Christ today.

There are good commentaries on Revelation that give comprehensive, verse-by-verse analysis of the text. In contrast, the intent of this study is to traverse Revelation quickly. We will identify major landmarks and images that readers today may not readily understand. Along the way we will pause to consider issues such as Christology (theology about Jesus) and God’s role in the violence so prominent in Revelation. Our focus throughout will be on worship, with the conviction that study of John’s Apocalypse should inspire devotion to the God made known in Jesus today.

Our Tour Will Take a Detour

Instead of touring Revelation in the order its chapters appear in our Bibles, we will take a circuitous route, reading the book in a sequence that most quickly illuminates its historical and theological landscape. We will not give equal attention to all parts of the vision. Rather, we will focus on the theme of worship—worship of the emperor, worship of the Lamb, and worship in

our world today. After a brief introduction to the author and his circumstances as presented in Revelation 1, we will turn to Revelation 13, with its nightmare of beasts. The first beast apparently represents the empire, and the second embodies the institutions of emperor worship that put pressure on Christians to align themselves with Rome.

John's first-century audience was keenly aware of the pressure to worship the emperor and would have heard the first half of Revelation with that reality in mind. We modern readers, however, typically do not have the Roman Empire or emperor worship in mind when we first encounter John's vision. So we do well to start with the beastly caricature of empire in Revelation 13, then use what we learn there to illuminate the rest of the book.

English translations of the Bible usually begin individual visions in Revelation with words such as, "Then I saw . . ." ¹² That rendering of the Greek is not entirely helpful since most of John's visions actually start with "and" (*kai*): "And I saw . . ." or "And I looked . . ." John introduces the individual visions without necessarily indicating that there is a strict sequential relationship between them. When we are trying to understand the historical and political context of Revelation, we can examine portions of the book in the order that makes them most comprehensible two thousand years later.

There is, however, a theological trajectory to Revelation that culminates with the new Jerusalem, a symbol of salvation for the world. The book begins with a vision of Jesus, takes a long passage through destructive beasts and plagues, and ends with a glimpse of creation restored. We need to keep the end—the new Jerusalem—in view as we slog through the dark valleys of suffering and chaos.

Revelation Is Art and Poetry

At the beginning of our Bible, Genesis describes the dawn of creation. At the close of our canon, Revelation examines the end of time—and the dawn of a new day. With symbol and poetry, the beginning and end of the Bible make the confessional statement that God is sovereign. These books tell more about *who* is Lord than about *how* the cosmos begins or ends. They guide the reader toward faithful living in the present, speaking truth in language that is more metaphor than science. When Revelation depicts a voracious beast emerging from the sea, or the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, such evocative images should open our eyes to see the reality of structural evil in the world and the certainty that God will restore a fallen creation. What John says is true, but it mostly is not literal. We do not need to summon an astronomer to

12. For example, Rev. 5:1; 6:1; 10:1.

search the heavens for a city hurtling toward earth, or a biologist to determine the genus and species of the beast.

We might think of Revelation as an art gallery filled with colorful paintings, numbered and displayed as the artist chose to arrange them. The exhibit is dynamic and cohesive because all pieces contribute to an overall theme. But each painting also makes its own statement and can stand alone. Just as a good gallery can elicit wonder and nurture the human spirit, the book of Revelation can penetrate the soul in ways other than just through cognitive, rational portals. However perplexing Revelation may be to interpret, it is one of the more artistic books of the Bible.

Many Christians in the West have shut out the book of Revelation after seeing it exploited by cult leaders, pop eschatologists, and end-time fiction writers. Others grew tired of Revelation decades ago when churches split over premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial interpretations of the book. Those disputes centered on whether Christ will return before or after a thousand-year reign (millennium) on earth—and generally missed the discipleship mandate of the book. We will pay little attention to the millennium, which is all of six verses (20:1–6), and simply underscore the main point of that part of John’s vision: in the end evil will face defeat, and Christ will reign.

Use This Book as a Tour Guide

Use this book as a tour guide to John’s vision, paying attention to the reading assignments in Revelation at the beginning of each chapter. These readings vary in length since we will linger over certain brief passages and pass swiftly through other long sections. Do the full reading of Revelation in your own Bible, not just the few verses reproduced under chapter headings. The historical and theological commentary will make more sense if you engage the entire text.

At the end of each chapter is a short article on “Living the Vision.” These are vignettes of faithful witness by followers of Jesus Christ in centuries since John wrote Revelation. Some stories are from the early church, but most are contemporary or recent. All have parallels to some aspect of circumstances depicted in Revelation. The stories illustrate that followers of the Lamb in every generation wrestle with matters of allegiance, idolatry, violence, witness, and worship.

At the back of this book is a timeline highlighting biblical people and events important to Revelation. There also is a glossary with explanations of people, events, and terminology that may not be familiar to every reader.

John expects that a messenger will read aloud his vision in the context of a congregation (1:3). This suggests that Revelation needs group process and that we may benefit from hearing it read aloud. *Apocalypse and Allegiance*

can serve as a guide for group discussion or adult education classes. Fellow Christians can help to identify contemporary parallels to the signs and symbols of John's vision. Questions at the end of each chapter can guide personal or group reflection.

For Reflection

Before going further, take an hour or two to read Revelation from beginning to end. You may want to have pen and paper in hand and make a few notes in answer to these questions:

1. Who or what are the main characters in this drama?
2. What is the emotional or spiritual tone of the vision?
3. What patterns (numerical, visual, or thematic) do you find in Revelation?
4. What riddles and puzzles catch your attention?