

Surprised by Revelation

By Donghyun Jeong

Advent's meaning is twofold. It transports Christians to the first-century Jewish world, where some Jews were waiting for the messiah and his mighty kingdom. Through the time travel of Advent, Christians echo *their* waiting for the messiah by singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." At the same time, Advent represents another waiting, *our* waiting for this messiah's return and the completion of God's cosmic reign. When we pray "Thy kingdom come," in the prayer that the messiah taught us during his earthly ministry, we eagerly expect this future. Advent preaching falls somewhere between these two modes of waiting—or in both. We are waiting for the (re)coming of a Jewish messiah, whom we believe has already come two thousand years ago, but is now visibly absent.

In terms of the second mode of waiting, which I focus on in this article, the Book of Revelation is a relevant option for preachers during Advent. The prologue begins with the statement that this book is about "what must soon take place" (Rev 1:1, NRSV). Then John, the narrator, dramatically raises his voice and describes Jesus's vivid descent, which is reminiscent of Daniel's Son of Man figure ("Look! He is coming with the clouds," Rev 1:7). The book comes to an end with Jesus's assurance of his return ("See, I am coming soon!" 22:7, 22:12; cf. 22:20) and John's responsive prayer ("Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" 22:20). Between the beginning and end of the book, all kinds of colorful and/or dreadful images and symbols emerge that reinforce the crisis and catharsis created by the coming of the Lord Jesus. Is there anything else in the Bible more appropriate for Advent, a season of waiting, than Revelation?

Yet, preaching Revelation is precarious. The peril of preaching Revelation partly stems from its sharply dichotomized history of interpretation. On one hand, Revelation has often been thought to contain a one-to-one correspondence between what is foretold in the book written in the first century and concrete figures/events in the contemporary world. This type of reading, "futurist interpretation," existed in early and medieval Christianity, but gained more influence in modern popular culture. Examples include *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 1970s and the *Left Behind* series (from 1990s to early 2000s), both of which are built upon dispensational premillennialism, which can be traced back to John Darby in the 19th century and the Scofield Reference Bible in the early 20th century. Political structures (e.g., United Nations and the European Union, i.e., the "world government") and various developments in modern technology (Barcode, VeriChip, cryptocurrency, etc.) are often linked to elements in Revelation. Most recently, in the midst of the global pandemic, vaccination has been understood by some interpreters as the mark of the beast.

On the other hand, biblical scholars in the mainstream academy have read Revelation primarily in its first-century context (i.e., historical-critical interpretation). The genre of Revelation falls within Jewish apocalyptic tradition, which

uses a lot of literary conventions. For example, the theme of binding a demonic, fallen angelic figure and confining it in an underworld prison (20:2) echoes depictions in Jewish apocalyptic writings (e.g., Book of the Watchers in 1 Enoch). Revelation, as an early Christian document, addresses Christian communities that were marginalized and persecuted in the Roman Empire. The monstrous beings in the Book of Revelation represent Roman emperors and imperial realities, as well as satanic forces behind them. In light of *gematria* (ancient convention of giving a numerical value to a name), the mysterious number of the beast in 13:18 is best understood as referring to Nero Caesar. The “great whore” seated on the seven mountains (17:9) displays the geographic features of the city of Rome. The Book of Revelation is not a secret prophecy for what is happening in the modern political landscape nor for technological innovations, but it reveals to us what ancient Jews and Christians hoped for in the first-century Roman world.

As a New Testament scholar, I primarily read Revelation through a historical-critical lens, and I do not agree with the many detailed eschatological scenarios that connect Revelation directly to figures, events, and phenomena in the modern world. I do believe that educating ourselves with more robust historical research would help us resist theories of the end times that fan people’s fear, anxiety, and hatred. I acknowledge, however, that both (not just the former) readings have shortcomings because they are primarily concerned with the following questions: To what does this or that figure, event, or passage in Revelation refer? Does it refer to the modern world? Or, does it refer to the distant past (i.e., the first-century Roman world)? Roughly speaking, interpretative referentiality pays attention to either the future (fundamentalist, often dispensational premillennial readings) or the past (historical-critical readings). Reading Revelation has become a quest to decode this apocalypse with plain answers.

Preachers can benefit from engaging Revelation artistically, as a work of art, as a narrative poem, and as a multi-sensory performance.¹ I propose both preachers and congregants be surprised by Revelation. What if we focus on describing Revelation in detail (i.e., doing ekphrasis), rather than explaining away the text’s difficulties in service to a clear lesson? What if we help our congregations linger on the oddity of unfamiliar images and sounds? John envisions the lamb (that appears slain but is standing near the throne of God) as a lion (5:5-6). We are stuck by the lamb-lion, with seven horns and seven eyes, if we try to visualize this hybridity and monstrosity.² The lamb-lion is the only one worthy of opening the seven seals (5:9) that unleash God’s eschatological plan that unfolds throughout the book. One by one, plagues and disasters are the result of opening the seals (chs. 6–7). Yet, when the lamb opens the seventh, there is dead silence (8:1) until the theophanic sounds explode in 8:5. We are stuck by this flow, if we pause to experience it as a performance.

Audio-visual effects continue to mark important moments in the narrative. The vision of the heavenly throne is accompanied by lightning and voices and thunder

(4:5). This motif is intensified by the addition of an earthquake in 8:5 between the seven seals and the seven trumpets, with hail in 11:19 between the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, and in 16:18 with even larger hail that occurs after the seven bowls. These cycles of seven do not easily support a simple dispensational premillennialism eschatology, but rather represent a sophisticated narrative structure of recapitulation and spiral progression toward the denouement. Revelation displays insertions and digressions of sub-stories, shifts of scenes between the plagues on earth and the praises in the heavenly throne-room, and alternating of analepsis and prolepsis in the eschatological timeline. With these devices, the story proceeds to the end: the fall of Babylon (chs. 17–18), the coming of the heavenly horse rider and the defeat of the beast (ch. 19), the final destruction of Satan after a thousand years (ch. 20), and the descending of the new Jerusalem (chs. 21–22). Extraordinary sounds and awe-inspiring images abound throughout this poetic work.

To be clear, an ekphrasis reading of Revelation should not abandon previous historical-critical solutions to certain riddles—for example, the beast from the sea (13:1) is Rome and/or its emperors, the beast from earth (13:11, or false prophets in 16:13) represents provincial collaborators or priests in the imperial cults, and Babylon (17:5) is code for Rome. The text of Revelation itself encourages such deciphering: e.g., the seven lampstands before the heavenly throne are seven spirits (4:5); the golden bowls filled with incense are the prayers of the saints (5:8); and a mind with wisdom (17:9) will recognize the woman as the great city reigning over the kings of the earth (17:18). Understanding these references in the context of the first century is a first step for responsible interpretation, but it is by no means exhaustive. Revelation as a poetic text has a surplus of meaning. Furthermore, the power of preaching Revelation in Advent can be found in the poetics of layered narratives and the juxtaposition of grotesque and hopeful images, which stir, confound, and provoke the audience. Revelation invites the readers into “witnessing” (the Greek term *martys* originally means “witness,” not someone who dies in support of their faith).³ Eye-witnessing (rather than explaining) what God and the lamb are doing in Revelation is a faithful way of reading and preaching Revelation.

Even this approach, however, is not without pitfalls. Putting ourselves in the place of viewers runs the risk of turning Revelation into an exotic object, and us into the voyeuristic spectators of the Roman world.⁴ Witnessing the violent images in Revelation raises moral issues.⁵ Divine violence is acted upon gendered, sexualized, and classed bodies in Revelation. For example, the woman Babylon, which represents the imperial city, is paradoxically a prostitute, a sex-slave.⁶ This great and powerful “harlot” is naked, condemned, and destroyed. Even her flesh is devoured—cannibalism (17:16). God is the God of wrath (e.g., 15:1; 16:1), and his wrathful judgment is visualized as a blood-shedding wine press (14:19–20). The plainest parts of Revelation (chs. 2–3) still contain polemics against leaders and Christian groups other than the author’s, calling them Jezebel (2:20) or Balaam

(2:14) and condemning these groups' faith and practice as idolatry and fornication. In some sense, Revelation is filled with texts of terror. Readers slip into complicity by participating in this imperial gaze.

This Advent, I would like to observe my pastor leave the pulpit without resolving all the tensions within the presented text—to see space at the altar for lingering questions, a place to accept that we wait for things only expressed poetically, in a mirror dimly. For us to resist the temptation to become clever astrologists, rather than faithful witnesses. To ask how should we cope with violence and polemic in Revelation ethically? Can we hold on to hope in the midst of suffering without justifying suffering? Can we live out the radical hope in Revelation without vilifying others—whom we wish to call the beast, Babylon, Jezebel, and Balaam? If I understand correctly, the divine-human encounter occurs not after the sermon (as the listener, walking out of the sanctuary, ruminates on the “lesson”), but at the very moment of proclamation. Our Advent sermons on Revelation would invite both the preacher and the congregants to be unsettled, encouraged, and transformed by this early Christian art with awe and wonder.

Notes

1. Revelation's powerful images influenced many artists, musicians, and writers throughout Western history. Cornish R. Rogers, “Preaching Values in the Book of Revelation,” in *Preaching through the Apocalypse: Sermons from Revelation*, ed. Cornish R. Rogers and Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1992), 7. What I emphasize in this article is that Revelation itself can be understood as early Christian art. My perspective is indebted to Andrew R. Guffey, *The Book of Revelation and the Visual Culture of Asia Minor: A Concurrence of Images* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), which suggests the author of the Book of Revelation “belongs in the art history of early Christianity” (210).

2. “[T]he hybrid nature of the Lamb . . . is considered just as monstrous as that of the beast rising from the sea.” Heather Macumber, *Recovering the Monstrous in Revelation* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021), 2.

3. Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: WJK, 2005). Blount rightly notes, “Witnessing, not dying, was the goal John sought out for his hearers and readers” (x).

4. For how Revelation participates in the Roman imperial culture of spectatorship, see Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 14-63.

5. “Revelation does not provide the reader with a purely nonviolent message. Yet it may still offer opportunities for reflection and honest self-critique that are a key to the interpreter's ethical appropriation of the text.” Susan E. Hylen, “Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation,” *CBQ* 73 (2011): 796.

6. For a postcolonial and womanist hermeneutical approach that focuses on the woman Babylon as an ambivalent character in Revelation, see Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambivalence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 125-174.