

**Heavenly Lessons in Worship from the Book of Revelation**  
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The book of Revelation teaches more about worship than any other New Testament book. The heavenly scenes around God's throne portray an ideal of worship that one day believers will enjoy with saints from all times, people groups, and languages. This perfect heavenly worship suggests powerful principles about true worship and has important implications for what worship ought to be here on earth.

The central message of Revelation is that when Jesus Christ returns at the end of history, God will fix everything that is wrong with his creation and remove all evil from it. His redeemed people will be glorified to dwell with him in the new heaven and new earth, while Satan, fallen angels, and all people who do not believe in Jesus Christ will face a just eternal punishment.<sup>1</sup> Since the essence of worship is acknowledging the Lordship of the one true God, God's plan to make all things right in creation means that Christ is redeeming a people who will worship and serve God for all eternity.

The heart of worship is an entire life orientation towards God, not simply liturgical actions or words of praise. Actions and words of worship are an outward expression of a person's deeper heart orientation. Worship "involves honoring, serving and respecting" God and "abandoning any loyalty or devotion that hinders an exclusive relationship with him." Worship is "fundamentally faith expressing itself in obedience and adoration."<sup>2</sup>

The book of Revelation challenges the reader to choose this whole-hearted life orientation toward God, no matter the cost or pressures to conform to the world. Each person must make a definitive life choice: Either one chooses obedience to and worship of the true God and the victorious Lamb of God, or by default one follows a life honoring Satan, under the influence of his earthly representatives and institutions. Although the earthly scenes describe eschatological events, this message is relevant to people of every generation and is the heart of the Gospel.

Even though the content of much of the book of Revelation is a depiction of eschatological events at the climax of history, the function of the book is to call the people of God to righteousness, faithful witness, and worship of the only true God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses were written not to feed the curiosity of people about eschatological events, but to encourage faithfulness to God in times of persecution and to assure people of God's certain victory in the face of increasing evil. By peeking behind the scenes to see that God is reigning on his throne and is being worshipped by angels and redeemed humanity, the events of everyday life and history are put into a proper perspective. This is why Jewish apocalypses were a common literary type during the period of Graceo-Roman occupation

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<sup>1</sup> Most commentators see the central theme along these lines. Easley, for example, says that the central theme is that Jesus, the Lord of history, will return without fail to earth to bring history to its proper conclusion (Rev. 1:7; Kendall H. Easley, vol. 12, *Revelation*, Holman New Testament Commentary; (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 1).

<sup>2</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging With God. A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 283. C. E. B. Cranfield, "Divine and Human Action: The Biblical Concept of Worship," *Int* 12, no. 4 (1958): 387, sees four broad uses of the terms for worship in Scripture: (1) adoration of God; (2) public worship of the assembled people of God; (3) private religious expressions of devotion to God of families or individuals; and (4) worship as a whole life activity.

of Israel and post-biblical Christian apocalypses were popular in the first few centuries of the Church, when Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire.

This study explores how worship fits into the structure of Revelation and supports some major themes in the book. It also shows how Revelation calls the reader to choose whether they will worship and serve the one true God or false gods empowered by Satan. No choice is more important, since it determines each person's eternal destiny.

### The Centrality of Worship in the Book of Revelation

Worship is one of the most significant themes in the book of Revelation.<sup>3</sup> There are twenty four occurrences of προσκυνέω, the most important Greek verb for worship, which is more than any other New Testament book. The worship of both God (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:1, 16; 14:7; 15:4; 19:4, 10; 22:9) and Christ (5:14; 15:4 [cf. v. 3]) are described with this term and the worship of any other being is forbidden.<sup>4</sup> There are numerous references to giving God glory (δόξα: 1:6; 4:9, 11; 5:12, 13; 7:12; 11:13; 14:7; 15:4; 16:9; 19:7) and honor (τιμή: 4:9, 11; 5:12-13 [Christ]; 7:12) and blessing (4:9, 11; 5:12-13 [Christ]; 7:12). Revelation also uses many other important worship terms, such as λατρεύω, meaning "to worship" or "to serve" (7:15; 22:3), αἰνέω, meaning "to praise" (19:5), and εὐχαριστία, meaning "thanksgiving" (4:9; 7:12; 11:17). Revelation frequently uses πίπτω in the sense of "to fall down" in obeisance and honor before God (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4) and Christ (1:17; 5:8, 14). The fact that πίπτω is often joined in a hendiadys with προσκυνέω shows its importance as a worship term in Revelation (5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4, 10; 22:8).

In addition, depictions of heavenly worship and commands to worship God permeate the book. Revelation is full of richly described heavenly scenes in which angels and redeemed humans worship God and Jesus, the victorious the Lamb of God (e.g. 4:8-11; 5:9-10, 11-14; 7:9-12; etc.). The heavenly worship scenes extend the message beyond a prediction of "things to come" and interpret the significance of the visions of earthly eschatological events.<sup>5</sup> God's victory over Satan and all forms of evil is described in the narrative and celebrated through the heavenly hymns and declarations of praise. There are at least sixteen hymns or spoken declarations of praise in the book (4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-2, 3, 5, 6-8), as well as other instances of worship for which the words are not given (e.g. 14:3-5). There are also angelic proclamations celebrating the God's judgment and victory over evil that may have liturgical significance (12:10-12; 18:1-3, 4-19, 21-24).<sup>6</sup>

With rare exceptions (1:17), most instances of heavenly worship are done by groups of angels, redeemed people or both together. Even the angelic proclamations of God's victory (12:10-12; 18:2-24) are intended to lead others to a response of worship to God for his mighty

<sup>3</sup> David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse of John As Oral Enactment," *Int* 40 (n.d.): 255, probably goes too far when he says the central theme of the book is the proper worship of God in conflict with worship of Satan and the state. But he is correct that true worship is one of the major themes of the book and closely connected with its purpose.

<sup>4</sup> Revelation criticizes the worship of demons and idols (9:20), the Beast (13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), Satan, who empowers the Beast (13:4) and forbids the worship of angels (19:10; 22:8). Rev. 3:9 uses in its etymological sense of "bow down" in respect and submission to a superior. Here it says unbelievers will one day bow down to believers, who will reign and judge the world with Christ; cf. 5:10; 20:4, 6; 22:5).

<sup>5</sup> L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford University: New York, 1990), 53.

<sup>6</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 47, considers chapter 18 a hymn, which seems unlikely, since it is presented as the proclamation of a single angel. Nevertheless, it does celebrate God's victory, much like the psalms that celebrate God's victory over his enemies (e.g. Psalm 3; 68; 89; etc.).

deeds (e.g. 18:4, 20). Many passages emphasize the vast numbers of people and angels that worship God together. Jesus the victorious Lamb that was slain is worshipped by “the number of myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...’” (5:11-12a; cf. 19:1, 6: “a great multitude”).<sup>7</sup> One day all creation will participate in this worship of God and Christ: “Every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea and all things in them” worship God and the Lamb (5:13). This reiterates Isaiah’s prophecy that “to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance (Isa. 45:23), which, like John, the Apostle Paul applies to Jesus Christ: “At the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11; cf. Rom 14:11).

### **The Importance of Worship Scenes of the Structure of Revelation**

The literary structure of Revelation emphasizes the importance of worship of the true God and Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The scenes of heavenly worship that appear at key places in the vision help interpret the significance of the vision for the reader.

The entire book is framed with the theme of worship. The opening includes a doxology that affirms that God has made all redeemed people priests to God.<sup>8</sup> This is followed by John’s initial visionary encounter with the glorified Jesus Christ, which leads him to fall down in worship and awe in light of Christ’s glory (1:17).<sup>9</sup> After the concluding vision, John falls down before his angelic guide to worship him (22:8), but the angel rebukes him. “Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. *Worship God*” [italics mine] (22:9). This command serves as a climax that reinforces a pervasive theme in the book: We are to worship only the true God and to reject the worship of all false gods and even angels. This command to worship God alone appears right after Jesus says “behold, I am coming quickly” (v. 7) and is followed by the concluding pericope of the book, which urges believers to live righteous lives in view of the return of Christ to judge the wicked and reward the righteous (vv. 10-21, especially 11-12, 14). Thus the eager anticipation of the return of Christ should motivate believers to worship God and to live righteous lives that glorify him.

The heavenly worship scenes in God’s throne room in chapters 4-5 set a context for the earthly scenes in chapters 6-20, which describe the increasing influence of Satan and evil at the end of history, God’s judgments on Satan and evil people, and the final defeat and eternal punishment of all evil beings. From an earthly perspective, the world appears to be in chaos due to the increasing influence of evil powers. But these heavenly scenes assure the reader that God is still on his throne and he is being worshipped as creator, redeemer, and sovereign Lord of

<sup>7</sup> All Bible quotations are from the NASB 1995, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. 1:4-8 reads like the opening to a Greek letter, with a blessing or doxology following the identity of the sender and recipients. Revelation is widely recognized as a hybrid genre which interweaves letter, apocalyptic and prophetic elements (e.g. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1999), 37; Osborne, *Revelation*, 12). In addition to the letters in chapters 2-3, Revelation describes itself as both an “apocalypse” (ἰσοκαλύπτεις, 1:1) and a “prophecy” (προφητεία, 1:3).

<sup>9</sup> The fear John felt in the presence of Christ’s glory (v. 18) is a normal and proper reverence of God (cf. 14:7: “fear God and give Him glory”). Throughout Revelation, falling down before God (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 19:4) or Christ (5:8, 14) is an act of worship. To fall down in worship before anyone other than God is forbidden (19:10, 20:22:8), reinforcing the impression that at John’s initial encounter with the glorified Christ, he acknowledged him as God.

history.<sup>10</sup> God is in control, despite Satan's best efforts to capture human hearts and to misdirect their worship toward false gods. Thus these worship scenes function to give assurance and comfort to suffering believers and to turn their eyes away from suffering, persecution and the apparent victory of evil, which the vision shows to be short-lived (cf. 5:10-11). The worship scenes also reinforce the certainty of the victory of Christ, the Lamb, a theme that it brought to its dramatic climax in the final battle to defeat evil and the wedding of the Jesus, the Lamb of God to his bride, the Church in chapters 18-20. The Lamb is praised because "You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (5:9). This provides assurance that Gospel will be successfully proclaimed to all kinds of people from all over the world. This encourages believers to persevere as faithful witnesses for Christ, even though they face persecution and even martyrdom for doing so (13:7, 15, 17).

When the vision describes God's temporal judgments on the wicked on earth, frequently the narrative cuts away to heavenly scenes where angels or the redeemed praise God for his righteous judgments (angels: 11:15-18; 16:4-7; the redeemed: 15:3-4; both: 19:1-8). For example, after the seventh trumpet sounds, loud voices in heaven triumphantly proclaim, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever." Then the 24 elders fall on their faces and worship God, because he has shown his justice and sovereignty by defeating and judging his enemies (11:16-18):

We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.

The language in this praise is similar to various Psalms that celebrate God's defeat of evil (e.g. Ps. 58:10; 96:11-13; cf. Deut 32:43; Isa 26:21). This worship scene occurs at a critical transitional point in the narrative of the vision. It is just before the symbolic depiction of Satan's persecution of Christ and the people of God (chapter 12) and the rise of the beast from the sea, which sets up a counterfeit alternative to the worship of the true God (chapter 13). The praise of God affirms the irony that, despite Satan's best efforts to thwart the work of God and Christ, God is still in control. The final events that will culminate in the defeat of Satan, the reward of the righteous, and Christ's comprehensive reign over all creation have been set in motion.

Many other worship scenes are interposed between earthly events to provide assurance of the ultimate victory of God, despite the rise in evil described in the narratives. For example, right after the description of the beast's demand that all worship him, 144,000 redeemed people with the name of God the Father and the Lamb sing "a new song" in worship to God with musical accompaniment (14:2-3). A "new song" is a concept rooted in Exodus motifs and refers to "a victory song [which celebrates] the new situation brought about by God's warring activity" against his enemies (cf. Ps 96:1; Isa 42:10).<sup>11</sup> The worship interlude shows that God has

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<sup>10</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 172, notes that the many references to God's throne underscore his sovereignty, for which he is given glory (4:9-11; 5:12-13).

<sup>11</sup> The angels (5:9) and the multitude of the redeemed (14:3) sing "a new song." This concept is rooted in Exodus motifs (cf. Ps 96:1; Isa 42:10) and is "a technical term for a victory song [which celebrates] the new situation brought about by God's warring activity" (Noel Nue, *Created for Worship. From Genesis to Revelation to You* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2005), 32).

redeemed a vast number of people, who will not give in to the demands of the beast. This encourages the reader to persevere, even in the face of severe persecution.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, just before the 7 last plagues are unleashed, the redeemed who had resisted the pressure to worship the beast sing “the song of Moses” and “the song of the Lamb” (15:2-4) with instrumental accompaniment (harps, 15:2). These songs celebrate God’s victory and deliverance, commemorating both the Exodus (cf. Exod. 15:1-18; Deut. 32) and deliverance in Christ. The redeemed praise God that his judgments on the wicked are righteous (v. 3), that he reigns as King of all nations, and that people of every nation fear and worship him (Rev. 15:4). During the pouring out of the six bowls of God’s wrath (16:5-7), angels similarly praise God for his righteous judgments against the wicked. After the Lamb wins the final battle against the beast and his followers and the wicked Babylon is destroyed, an angel proclaims God’s defeat of God’s enemies (18:1-24). Then “a great multitude in heaven” shouts a fourfold “hallelujah” celebrating God’s victory over those who corrupt the earth, the justness of God’s judgments against the wicked, the reign of God, and the wedding of Christ to his bride, the Church (19:1-8). This worship serves as a transition between the final defeat of the wicked on earth and the wedding of the Lamb.

In summary, the heavenly scenes of worship serve several interpretive functions in relationship to the preceding or following earthly scene: (1) *Contrast*: The heavenly worship shows that God is in control, despite the increase of evil on earth. (2) *Emphasis and affirmation*: The worship expresses agreement with the righteousness of God’s judgments. (3) *Transition and anticipation*: The worship scene sometimes introduces a key eschatological event, such as the wedding of the Lamb, to help the reader appreciate its significance.

### **The Eternal Worship and Service by the Redeemed**

Numerous passages describe a vast multitude of the redeemed worshipping God before his heavenly throne, even while God’s judgments are being unleashed on the earth (e.g. 5:13; 7:14-17; 14:1-3). Many of these passages indicate that the redeemed will worship God throughout eternity. For example, the believers who come out of the great tribulation “are before the throne of God and they serve Him day and night in His temple” (7:14). There will be “a great multitude” of the redeemed worshipping God (19:1, 6). The redeemed will come “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (5:9) and “all the nations will come and worship” before God’s throne (15:4).

The priesthood of believers is an important motif that stresses that believers will worship and serve God forever. The introduction to Revelation includes a doxology that affirms that Christ made believers to be priests who will serve God: He “released us from our sins by His blood and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father” (1:5b-6a). In Revelation, the priesthood of believers stresses at least two important privileges: Believers will have direct access to God in eternity and an eternal mission of worshipping and serving God, which is often connected with reigning with Christ (5:10; 20:6). “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth” (5:9-10). Chapters 21-22 depict this

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<sup>12</sup> The number 144,000 is probably an idealized number, formed by multiplying several numbers considered perfect by Jews (12 times 12 times 1000). This resulting perfect number sharply contrasts to the imperfect number that represents the beast (666, cf. 13:18). The commitment of the redeemed to Christ and his ownership of them is shown by the fact that they have the name of the Father and the Lamb on their forehead (14:1), in contrast to those who receive the mark of the beast on their right hand or forehead (13:16). Their righteousness and faithfulness to God (14:4-5) is in sharp contrast to the wicked who submit to the beast (ch. 13).

priesthood theme in the vivid imagery of the new earth, in which the redeemed will joyfully worship and serve God and Christ, both of whom will be intimately present with them in the new heavens and earth. “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them” (21:3; cf. 21:22-23; 22:3-5: they will see His face and reign forever). God’s presence among his people, which was symbolized by the tabernacle in the Old Testament, will become a reality in the new earth (cf. 7:15). These access and service dimensions of priesthood are connected with the important worship word λατρεύω, which has the double meaning of “to worship” or “to serve” (7:15; 22:3). The redeemed who will come out of the “great tribulation” will “serve Him day and night in His temple” and (7:14-15). Similarly, in the new earth, the redeemed “will see His face” (22:4), they will “serve Him” (22:3, λατρεύσουσιν), and “they will reign forever and ever” (22:5). The eternal, joyous service that believers give to God brings him glory and is an act of worship.

### **Direct Commands to Worship God Alone**

In addition to numerous narrative models of heavenly worship, there are several direct commands to give worship to the true God (14:6-7; 19:5, 10; 22:8-9). These commands appear at strategic places in the book, in order to emphasize the importance of worship. This shows that worship is not simply reserved for heaven, but it should be a central feature of life on earth today. Believers should begin worshipping God now based on the patterns of heavenly worship depicted in this book.

At a critical point in the narrative of John’s vision, an angel calls all people on the earth to worship the true God: “I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, ‘Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters’” (14:6-7). God’s eternal message for humanity is that people should worship and glorify God alone, because he is the creator and judge of all. The heart of the Gospel, therefore, is the call to turn one’s allegiance from sin and false gods and to turn to the one true God and to submit to his Lordship. “Human sin is fundamentally a refusal to glorify God, a rejection of our created vocation to worship him.”<sup>13</sup> In Romans 1:21, Paul similarly reflects the perspective that sin, at its heart, is a failure to worship God: “Even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” Thus when Christians proclaim the good news that Jesus died for their sins, they are not merely offering people a way of forgiveness for their sins. They are also calling people to align their lives rightly in relationship with God, and hence to worship him alone. When a person comes to faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, he is acknowledging who the true God is, which is in itself an act of worship that begins a life of worship that will continue throughout eternity. Since worship is not only praise, but also a life lived to the glory of God, evangelism is fundamentally a call to worship God appropriately.<sup>14</sup>

This importance of the Gospel as the call to worship the true God alone is highlighted by its strategic placement in the book. Chapter 13 depicts the counterfeit system of worship of the beast and Satan, who gives the beast his miraculous power (vv. 2, 4). This is followed by the

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Peterson, *Engaging*, 266.

contrasting description of 144,000 people who had been redeemed and maintained righteous lives (14:1-5). These have the name of God the Father and the Lamb of God on their foreheads, in contrast to those who accepted the mark of the beast, indicating their submission to his lordship and ownership.<sup>15</sup> After these two kinds of people are described, an angel announces the eternal gospel, which is a call to worship and glorify the true God alone (14:7). This challenges the reader to choose who his god will be and whom he will worship. There are only 2 choices: Either one worships the true God and Jesus, the Lamb, or he inadvertently worships Satan by worshipping, serving and obeying any false god. The consequences of this choice are clearly described in the subsequent paragraph: Anyone who worships the beast “will drink of the wine of the wrath of God . . . and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone . . . forever and ever; they have no rest day and night” (14:9b-11a, cf. vv 14-20). By contrast, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord . . . so that they may rest from their labors” (14:13).<sup>16</sup>

Another command to worship God occurs in the middle of the four-fold hallelujah (19:1-8). This occurs at the time of the final defeat of the wicked on earth (celebrated in chapter 18; described in 19:11-21) and just prior to the wedding of the Lamb to the his bride, the Church (19:7-8). A vast multitude of redeemed humanity and angels (19:1, 4, 6), join together in a deafening shout of praise to God so great it sounds like a waterfall and peals of thunder. In the midst of this great roar of praise a voice comes from God’s throne<sup>17</sup> saying, “Give praise to our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great.” This importance of this command is reinforced by its position right in the middle of the praise, between the first two hallelujahs and the last two hallelujahs. It reinforces the message of the book that all people are to praise God (“both great and small”) and that this is to be a task for life in this world, not just in eternity. The command to worship God is repeated by John’s angelic guide at the end of this dramatic worship scene, when John attempts to worship him (19:10). The angel commands John not to worship him, because he is merely a fellow servant of God along with redeemed humanity. Rather he sharply commands John, “Worship God!” The placement of this command at the climax of the pericope urges the reader to join today with the vast multitude who will praise God at Christ’s final victory.

The final command to worship the true God alone occurs at a climactic position near the end of the book (22:9). This is in the midst of Jesus’ promise to return quickly (vv. 7, 12, 14) and after the final vision of the new heaven and earth where believers will dwell closely with God and Christ and worship and serve them forever (21:1-22:5). As believers await Christ’s return, they are to continue to worship the true God and to avoid worship and conformity to the demands of false gods under Satan’s dominion.

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<sup>15</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 516.

<sup>16</sup> The earthly suffering that God pours out upon people is designed as a final warning of the eternal consequences of following and worshipping false gods. They are intended to bring people to repentance, to turn from false gods to worship and serve the true God, but sadly most people just blaspheme God all the more (9:20-21; 16:9, 11).

<sup>17</sup> The fact that the command comes “from the throne” shows the divine authorization of the message (cf. David Aune, *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary, no. 52A, ed. David A. Hubbard et al. (Waco, TX: Word, 1997), 1027). However, it is not clear who giving this command from the throne. It could be God or Christ (Beale, *Revelation*, 930), since it comes from the throne. But the reference to “our God” (v. 5) suggests that it is one of the angels, such as the four creatures who are around the throne (cf. 4:6-9) or one of the 24 elders (cf. 4:4; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1977), 338).

## The Cosmic Battle for Worship

The book of Revelation graphically describes the great cosmic battle for allegiance and worship.<sup>18</sup> The true God and the victorious Lamb of God continually reign and are being worshipped behind the scenes by angels and the redeemed in heaven, even during times when Satan seems to have his greatest impact. Ultimately, God will defeat all evil and create a new heavens and earth, where the righteous will worship and serve God and Jesus Christ for all eternity (ch. 18-22). But Satan, who is symbolized as a great dragon, deceives the world into worshipping false gods and idols. Satan has opposed God's work in this way throughout history (12:9; 20:3).<sup>19</sup> Yet Revelation focuses on Satan's last great attempt to control the world and to deceive the world into worshipping and serving him (13:14; 20:8, 10). In his anger against God, Satan persecutes those who worship the true God and Jesus Christ (e.g. 13:7, 15, 17). In that great climactic time of history, Satan will install a counterfeit messiah and evil political structures to enforce the worship of the counterfeit messiah.

The importance of the theme of the cosmic battle for worship is emphasized by the fact that about half of the occurrences of προσκυνέω ("to worship") refer to false forms of worship. The word refers to the worship of demons and idols (9:20), the beast (13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), and Satan, who empowers the beast (13:4). Even John, when overwhelmed by his powerful vision, momentarily slips and falls down before his angelic guide, but is sharply rebuked and commanded to worship God alone (19:10; 22:8). These verses serve to remind the reader to make the right choice to worship only the true God, regardless of the consequences in this earthly life.

### Satan's Counterfeit Worship

The worship of any false god ultimately reduces to the glorification and worship of Satan, who empowers false gods (13:2, 4). People who worship any god but the true God and Jesus Christ are in fact worshipping demons, who serve under Satan's dominion (9:20; 16:13-14). The Apostle Paul similarly recognizes that the worship of idols and false gods is really the worship of demons (1 Cor. 10:19-21). Revelation 13 describes the rise of "the beast from the sea," which is subsequently simply called "the beast" (13:2, 3, 4, 14, 15, 17, 18; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2, 10, 13; 19:19-20; 20:4, 10; also possibly 17:3, 7, 8, 12, 13, 17). This counterfeit messiah is Satan's final great attempt to place the world under his dominion and to deceive all humanity so they worship and glorify him, rather than the true God and his Son.<sup>20</sup> Satan ("the dragon") gives the beast "his power and his throne and great authority" (13:2; cf. 2 Thess. 2:8-10) and thus when people follow the beast and worship him, they also worship Satan, "because he gave his authority to the beast" (13:4). Everyone whose name is not recorded in the Lamb's book of Life will worship the beast (13:8).

Nearly every reference to receiving the mark of the beast is associated with worshipping him (14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4; but contrast 13:16-17).<sup>21</sup> The mark indicates ownership and

<sup>18</sup> The "cosmic battle for worship" is helpfully described by Nue, 33-34. 221-25.

<sup>19</sup> Rev. 9:20 probably refers to the ongoing idolatry, which was in fact demon worship, not primarily the eschatological worship of the beast, since the beast was not yet introduced at this point in the vision.

<sup>20</sup> "Whereas in the current climate Satan is content to work through systems of idolatry in order to maintain power by blinding and ensnaring men and women, in the day of the unveiling of the 'man of lawlessness' Satan will cast all pretence aside and seek worship directly through man completely conformed to his image." (Ibid., 225).

<sup>21</sup> It is possible that everyone (πᾶσιν τοῖς ζῶντι, 13:66) alive on earth at that time will be compelled to take the mark of the Beast (e.g. Osborne, *Revelation*, 516). In this view, it is not the mark, but worshipping the Beast that

allegiance. It is a counterfeit of the name of God and the Lamb that are symbolically written on the foreheads of the redeemed as a sign that they belong to God and Christ and are committed to glorifying them (3:12; 7:3; 9:4 [“the seal of God on their foreheads”]; 14:1 [“His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads”]). The mark is either “the name of the beast or the number of his name” (Rev. 13:16). The number “666” is a human number (13:18, “that of a man”), in contrast to the divine name of the true God and the Lamb, which the redeemed are sealed with. In this final conflict, the two choices everyone faces are crystal clear: Either one belongs to Christ, is sealed with his name, and worships the true God and Christ; or he has the mark of the Beast and worships him (13:8). Since worshipping the beast shows a person belongs to God’s enemy, Satan, his name is not written in the book of Life (13:8) and he will face eternal punishment for rejecting undivided worship of the true God (14:11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Although the powerful social and religious control exercised by this eschatological figure is patterned after the emperor worship demanded by Roman emperors in John’s time, the principle is applicable in every age to any competing allegiance to Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Satan’s system of worship includes many counterfeits to the worship of the true God and the Lamb. The counterfeit evil trinity consists of Satan (12:3-17; 13:1, the red dragon), the beast (13:1b-10, 18), and a false prophet, who deceives people to worship the beast (16:13; 19:20; 20:10; also described as a “beast from the earth” in 13:11-17). The beast is a counterfeit messiah that all are compelled to worship (13:14, 16; cf. 2 Thess. 2:4). This is probably the same person as “the man of lawlessness” in 2 Thess. 2:4, who also will compel absolute worship, embodies the full power of Satan, performs false miracles, and deceives the world (2 Thess. 2:4, 9-10). The beast is killed and then comes back to life (13:3, 12, 14) in an attempt to mimic the resurrection of Jesus, the “Lamb who was slain” (5:12). The authority of his throne comes from Satan (13:2, 4) and he hurls blasphemies at God, denying his authority (13:1, 5-6). The symbolic descriptions of the beast parody the description of Christ as a Lamb with 7 horns (compare 13:11 with 5:6). Satan also works through evil political structures to enforce this false worship and persecute those who worship the true God and Christ (13:7, 15, 17). His evil political system is depicted symbolically as “Babylon the Great” and is a counterfeit of the holy city, the New Jerusalem. This city is a place of immorality rather than righteousness and “glorified herself” rather than God (18:7). It is “a dwelling place of demons” (18:2), unlike the New Jerusalem where God will dwell with his people in all of his glory (21:22-23; 22:3). The beast establishes a counterfeit mark or seal of ownership (13:16; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4) that parodies the name of God and Christ written on the redeemed (3:12; 7:3; 9:4; 14:1). In this eschatological time, Satan’s influence will be widespread. The beast will be given “authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation,” (13:7; cf. 10:11; 11:9; 13:7), an expression that parodies the Lamb who redeemed people “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (5:9; cf. 7:19).

Revelation makes it clear, of course, that God will ultimately triumph. Although Satan and his agent, the beast, challenge God’s authority, God determines the limits and duration of their influence. The phrase “it was given to him” (οὐρανὸν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ) expresses the limits of God’s permission: “The authority to act for forty-two months was given to him” (13:5; cf. v. 7, 14,

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distinguishes the lost from the redeemed. Yet, Revelation 13 also says “the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast; they worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast” (13:3-4). Clearly believers are not included in “the whole earth” who worshipped the Beast and Satan. It is more likely that the meaning of πᾶς ὁ λαὸς τῆς γῆς in 13:66 is all kinds of people, which the subsequent phrase explains: “the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves.”

<sup>22</sup> The Roman Emperor Domitian insisted that people call him *dominus et deus* (“Lord and God”). Failure to honor the emperor as a god was a punishable political offense. (Peterson, *Engaging*, 263-64.)

15).<sup>23</sup> In the end, Satan, the beast, and evil people will be judged and cast into eternal punishment (20:1-4). Satan's political power system, "Babylon the Great", will be destroyed (17:1-19:10) and those who are part of it will be eternally tormented because of its immorality and because "she glorified herself" rather than God (18:7; contrast 15:4: only God's name should be glorified "because he alone is holy"). Despite the raging of Satan and his best efforts to overthrow God's reign and destroy God's people, God continues to reign and to be worshipped in heaven. Soon evil will be eradicated and God will be worshipped, not only in heaven, but also on a new earth by a multitude of redeemed people, who will serve and glorify him forever.

## Two Choices of Worship

Revelation presents the reader with two choices: either a person will worship and serve the true God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ, or he will end up inadvertently worshipping and glorying Satan, who is the true power behind all false gods, idols and counterfeit worship structures (13:2-4). The "eternal gospel" is the call to all people to "fear God, and give Him glory . . . ; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters" (Rev. 14: 7). "Every human being will worship something, and this choice determines one's eternal destiny."<sup>24</sup> People were made to worship. Either a person will worship the true God or he will worship a counterfeit. God is worthy of worship because he alone is the creator and redeemer (4:11; 5:9, 12). But God wants worship to be a voluntary act of submission to his reign and a joyful acknowledgement of his magnificence. "Acceptable worship involves faithfully serving God in the face of every conflicting loyalty."<sup>25</sup>

Revelation makes it clear that true worship is not simply an occasional liturgical act or verbal expression of praise. Revelation stresses that worship involves one's total life orientation. God expects nothing less than total commitment to him, with no mixture of allegiance to any false god. The gospel calls people worship, because when one turns from sin to God, he is turning from his former life and acknowledging his allegiance to the true God and his intention to live for God's glory (14:7). One either has God's seal with the name of God and Christ (3:12; 7:3; 9:4; 14:1) or he has the mark of the beast (13:8). David Peterson correctly observes:

Acceptable worship involves acknowledging and accepting God's claim for exclusive devotion and loyalty by rejecting every alternative. In the market-place, in politics, in the field of education or the arts, the Christian is constantly challenged to make the decisive choice for God that Jesus himself made, when he was tested so forcefully in the wilderness (cf. Mt. 4:8-10).<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, true worship requires a life a moral purity and righteousness. Worship is a total way of life lived to God's glory. To verbally acclaim God as "holy, holy, holy" (4:5), while living an unholy life is to deny the importance of that declaration about God's very nature. To declare "to Him be the glory and dominion" (1:6; cf. 4:11), while not living for his glory and

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<sup>23</sup> The expression "it was given to him . . ." (□□□□□□, 13:5, 7, 14, 15) expresses the limits of God's permission for evil to work. God only permitted the beast to utter blasphemies against God and his people for a limited time. The beast was not permitted to deceive those whose names are in the Lamb's Book of Life (13:8). "Only God, not the devil, sets times and seasons. The devil would never want to limit his work against God's kingdom to a mere 'three and a half years.'" (Beale, *Revelation*, 694.)

<sup>24</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 265.

with his reign over every aspect of one's life is a contradiction in terms. This is in part why there is a strong emphasis on moral purity in the letters to the seven churches (2:14, 20; 3:1, 4, 17-18). The wedding gown of the Church, the Bride of Christ, is "fine linen", which John says represents "the righteous acts of the saints" (19:7-8). One glorifies God by keeping his garments clean (3:4; cf. 3:18; 16:15), which means to be morally pure.<sup>27</sup> Since true righteousness only comes from Christ (3:18), the righteousness of believers brings glory to God and is thus an act of worship.

God is also worshipped through service to Christ, which is a way he will be glorified both now and throughout eternity (7:14-15; 22:3). God has made believers to be a kingdom of priests, who will serve God and reign with Christ for all eternity (5:10; 20:6; 22:3). Even now angels are praising God for this miracle (5:10)! Part of service in this life includes faithful witness to Christ, even if it requires martyrdom (13:7, 15, 17). When believers maintain uncompromising faithfulness to Christ, whatever the cost, their lives witness to the majesty of the true God and lead others to believe in him, which results in even more who will join the multitudes praising his name for all eternity.

Revelation strongly stresses that one cannot worship the true God correctly without also worshipping Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The book of Revelation has one of the most powerful presentations of the deity of Christ. In numerous passages, Jesus is worshipped equally with God the Father (e.g. 5:11-14). Jesus is always associated with God in ways no angel ever is, as the one rightfully deserving worship.<sup>28</sup> "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever" (5:13). This is especially striking given the emphasis in the book that only God is to be worshipped (e.g. 19:10; 22:9). It is through the "Lamb that was slain" (5:12, cf. 5:6, 9; 13:8) that God has achieved his victory over evil and has redeemed a people for himself "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (5:9), who will serve and worship him forever.

### Conclusion

Worship is a central part of the message of the book of Revelation. Revelation emphasizes that God calls all people to worship only God and to forsake honoring any false god or other created being. This theme is stressed through the numerous strategically placed heavenly scenes where angels and redeemed people worship God. Periodic commands to worship God alone are also placed at several climactic positions, including just after the conclusion of the vision.

The essence of the Gospel is the call to people to "fear God, and give Him glory . . . ; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth" (Rev. 14: 7). The Gospel calls people not just to accept Christ's payment for their sins, but also to assume a completely new life orientation under the lordship of Jesus Christ and thus to live each day for his glory. Since God will not share his glory with anyone else (Isa. 42:8), God judges any worship of or allegiance to false gods and calls for undiluted allegiance to him.

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<sup>27</sup> If the 144,000 who "kept themselves chaste" (14:4) is a picture of all Christians, *παρθένοι* ("chaste" or "virgins") would be "a metaphor of *all* true saints who have not compromised in various ways with the world *because* they have remained loyal as a virgin bride to her betrothed" (Beale, *Revelation*, 737). The purity of the Church as Christ's bride is stressed in 19:7-8.

<sup>28</sup> The Lamb is "in the center of the throne," which implies his authority is shared with God (7:17). The reference to Christ as shepherd in this verse echoes various Old Testament passages where God promises to be the shepherd of his people. "As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them" (Ezek. 34:12, cf. vv. 11-15; Ps. 23:1; 78:52; 80:1; Isa. 40:11).

While believers await Christ's return, they are to worship the one true God and to avoid worship and conformity to the demands of all false gods under Satan's dominion. Their faithfulness to this task, even in the face of persecution and martyrdom, serves as a witness to the one true God, who plans to redeem people of every race and nation through Jesus Christ. Worshipping God today is a preparation for the eternal destiny of God's people, who will live in intimate relationship with God and Jesus Christ in the new heavens and new earth, as they worship and serve them forever.