

The Relationship Between Worship and the Gospel in the Book of Revelation

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Evangelical Theological Society Far West Regional Meeting, April 23, 2021

The book of Revelation teaches more about worship than any other New Testament book. The heavenly scenes around God's throne portray the perfect worship that one day believers from all times, people groups, and languages will enjoy together.

The central message of Revelation is that when Jesus Christ returns at the end of history, the sovereign God will judge and remove all evil from creation. Christ's redeemed people will be resurrected and they will dwell with him in the perfect new heaven and new earth, completely free from all sin. On the other hand, Satan, the fallen angels and all people who do not believe in Jesus Christ will face a just eternal punishment banished from God's presence.¹ 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 toward 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."²

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 a person chooses to obey and worship the true God and the victorious Lamb of God, or by default his life honors Satan, under the influence of his earthly representatives and institutions. Although much of Revelation depicts eschatological events at the climax of history, the message is relevant in every generation. The book calls the people of God to righteousness, faithful witness, and worship of the only true God and his Son, Jesus Christ. The Gospel message demands that all people who worship false gods repent and turn to the worship of the one true God alone. The book of Revelation has a profound missional emphasis that is often overlooked.³

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 peering behind the scenes to see that God is reigning on his throne and is being worshiped 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 Greco-Roman occupation

¹ Although the book of Revelation has a complex mixture of themes, most commentators see the central theme along these lines. For example, Easley 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" (Kendell H. Easley, vol. 12, *Revelation*, Holman New Testament Commentary; (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 1).

² 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.

³ This missional theme is observed by Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 41.

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 paper explores how worship fits into the structure of Revelation and how worship relates to the Gospel proclamation. Revelation calls readers 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.⁴ Beale argues that the main idea of the book is that:

The sovereignty of God and Christ in redeeming and judging brings them glory, which is intended to motivate saints to worship God and reflect his glorious attributes through obedience to his word.... The exhortation in 14:7 comes close to summarizing this point of the book: “fear God and give to him glory because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship the one who has created” all things.⁵

The Vocabulary of Worship

Revelation contains twenty-four occurrences of προσκυνέω, the most important Greek verb for worship – more than any other NT 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.⁶ 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; δοξάζω: 15:4), honor (τιμή: 4:9, 11; 5:12-13 [Christ]; 7:12) and blessing (εὐλογία, 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).

Heavenly Worship Scenes

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

⁴ David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John As Oral Enactment,” *Int* 40 (n.d.): 255, argues that the central theme of the book is the proper worship of God in conflict with worship of Satan and the state.

⁵ 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), 151.

⁶ 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).

interpret the significance of the visions of earthly eschatological events.⁷ God's victory over Satan and all forms of evil is described in the narrative and celebrated through 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 references to worship for which the words are not given (e.g. 14:3-5). There are also angelic proclamations celebrating God's judgment and victory over evil that may have liturgical significance (12:10-12; 18:1-3, 4-19, 21-24).⁸

God and Christ are normally worshiped by groups of angels, redeemed people, or both together, rather than individuals (except for 1:17, when John alone worships the glorified Christ). The angelic proclamations of God's victory (12:10-12; 18:2-24) are intended to inspire the worship of God for his mighty deeds (e.g. 18:4, 20). Many passages emphasize the vast number of people and angels that worship God together. Jesus, the victorious Lamb that was slain, is worshiped by "myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands" (5:11-12a; cf. 19:1, 6: "a great multitude").⁹ One day all creation will participate in the 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" will worship God and the Lamb (5:13). This echoes Isaiah's prophecy that "every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance" to God (Isa. 45:23). John, like the Apostle Paul, sees Jesus Christ as the divine object of worship (Phil 2:10-11: "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"; cf. Rom 14:11).

The Importance of Worship Scenes in the Structure of Revelation

The literary structure of Revelation emphasizes the importance of the worship of the true God and Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The scenes of heavenly worship appear at key places to help the reader interpret the significance of John's apocalyptic vision.

The entire book is framed with the theme of worship. The opening includes a doxology that affirms that God has made all redeemed people to be priests to God.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ 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

⁷ L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford University: New York, 1990), 53.

⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 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.).

⁹ The Greek word μυριάς ("myriad") is the largest Greek number, either referring to 10,000 or a very large, undefined number (BDAG). Thus a myriad squared ("myriads of myriads") refers to an uncountable number, much like the modern word "infinity." All Bible quotations are from New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ 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. Beale, *Revelation*, 37; Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 12]). In addition to the letters in chapters 2-3, Revelation describes itself as both an "apocalypse" (ἀποκάλυψις, 1:1) and a "prophecy" (προφητεία, 1:3).

¹¹ 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.

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 scenes of heavenly worship of God and Christ 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 widespread evil as well as God’s judgment of all evil. 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 that he is being worshiped as creator, redeemer, and sovereign Lord of history.¹² 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 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 that Christ will be victorious in the final battle with evil and that Christ will be eternally united with his people in the wedding of the Lamb of God to his bride, the Church (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 the Gospel will be successfully proclaimed throughout the world to all kinds of people. 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).

Frequently after describing God’s temporal judgments of the wicked on earth, the vision cuts away to heavenly scenes where angels or redeemed humans 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, 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 twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship God, because he has shown his justice and sovereignty by defeating and judging his enemies:

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. (11:16-18)

This language 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 vision. It is just before the symbolic depiction of Satan’s persecution of Christ and the people of God (chap. 12) and the rise of the beast from the sea, which sets up a counterfeit alternative to the worship of the true God (chap. 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 have

¹² 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).

been set in motion that will culminate in the defeat of Satan, the reward of the righteous, and Christ's reign over all creation.

Heavenly 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 on their foreheads sing "a new song" in worship to God with instrumental accompaniment (14:2-3; cf. 5:9). The concept of a "new song" is 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 (Ps 96:1; Isa 42:10).¹³ A new song praises the sovereign God who is victorious over all evil and thus ought to be praised by all of the nations (Ps 33:3; 40:3; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10). The worship interlude shows that God has 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.¹⁴

Similarly, just before the seven final 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 (15:2; cf. 5:8; 14:2).¹⁵ These songs celebrate God's victory and deliverance, commemorating both the Exodus (cf. Exod 15:1-18; Deut 32) and deliverance through Christ's sacrificial death. The redeemed praise God that his judgments of 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). While the six bowls of God's wrath are being poured out (16:5-7), angels 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 his 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 scenes: (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 sometimes introduces a key eschatological event, such as the wedding of the Lamb, to help the reader appreciate its significance.

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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 (chap. 13). "The number 144,000 connotes the completeness of God's true people, in antithesis to the 666 on the foreheads of the beast's followers, which connotes their incompleteness in achieving the divine design for humanity." (Osborne, *Revelation*, 733)

¹⁵ Harps accompany the worship singing in 5:8, 14:2 and 15:2.

The Eternal Worship and Service by the Redeemed

Numerous passages describe a vast multitude of the redeemed worshipping God before his heavenly throne (e.g. 5:13; 7:14-17; 14:1-3; 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 redeemed will continue to worship God throughout eternity. They “are before the throne of God and they serve Him day and night in His temple” (7:14).

The priesthood of all believers is an important motif that stresses that believers will worship and serve God forever. The prologue to the book contains a doxology that affirms that Christ made all of the redeemed 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: (1) Believers will have *direct access to God* in eternity; and (2) they will have an *eternal mission of worshiping 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 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 on the new earth (cf. 7:15). Both the *access to God* and *service of God* dimensions of priesthood are combined in the important worship word *λατρεύω*, which has the double meaning of “to worship” and “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” (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 will give to God is an act of worship that will bring him glory.

Direct Commands to Worship God Alone

In addition to numerous narrative models of heavenly worship, there are commands to worship God at strategic places in the structure of the book (14:6-7; 19:5, 10; 22:8-9). Worship is not simply reserved for heaven. Believers should worship God on earth based on the heavenly patterns of worship.

Proclamation of the Eternal Gospel (14:6-7)

At a critical point in the structure of John’s vision, an angel calls all people 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 to humanity is that people should worship and glorify God alone, because he is the creator and judge of all. The Gospel calls people to turn from sin and allegiance to false

gods and to turn to the one true God. Noel Nue observes, “Human sin is fundamentally a refusal to glorify God, a rejection of our created vocation to worship him.”¹⁶ In Romans 1:21, Paul similarly says 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 human 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 Jesus 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 the call to worship God appropriately.¹⁷

This concept that the Gospel is the call to worship the true God alone is highlighted by the strategic placement of this angelic proclamation of the Gospel at the center of the apocalyptic vision.¹⁸ The preceding context sets the stage for the significance of this call to worship God. 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 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 rather than the mark of the beast, which indicates that they belong to God and submit to his lordship.¹⁹ After these two kinds of people are described, an angel announces the eternal gospel, which is the call to worship and glorify the true God alone (14:7). This challenges the reader to choose who his god will be. There are only 2 choices – either one worships the true God and Jesus, the Lamb, or he inadvertently worships Satan by worshiping, 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). God’s graciousness is shown by the fact that he gives humanity one final chance to repent before the final judgment (14:9-20).

The earthly suffering that God will pour out upon people near the end of history is designed as a final warning of the eternal consequences of worshipping false gods. These hardships are intended to bring people to repentance – to turn from false gods to worship and serve the true God.²⁰ Although some people repent after these disasters (e.g. 11:13), sadly many people blaspheme God all the more as a result of the suffering (9:20-21; 16:9, 11). Their unrepentant

¹⁶ Nue, 223.

¹⁷ Peterson, *Engaging*, 266.

¹⁸ The angelic proclamation of “the eternal Gospel” in Rev 14:6-7 appears very close to the center of the vision of chapters 4-22. In the NA28 Greek text of Revelation, nearly the same number of words occur before and after the angelic proclamation of the eternal Gospel: 4070 words before and 4108 words after (out of a total of 8237 words in chapters 4-22).

¹⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 516. The seal (7:1-8) and the name of God and Christ on the forehead (14:1) both convey the idea of authentication of the redeemed as well as ownership by God (cf. Odes Sol. 42:20; Dio Chrysostom Or. 4.23). Beale suggests that divine protection may also be implied, particularly by the seal: “The ‘seal’ or ‘name’ empowers saints to persevere through adversity, which authenticates their profession of faith as genuine and shows that they truly belong to God” (Beale, *Revelation*, 734).

²⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 41-42, argues that trumpets and bowls also function as a final offer of repentance.

response to God's final warning vindicates the justice of God in eternally punishing them for their sins.

Blaspheming God is the very opposite of worshiping and glorifying God. In 16:9, those who refuse to repent after the plagues "blaspheme the name of God", rather than "repent so as to give him glory." The Greek words βλασφημέω ("blaspheme") and δοξάζω ("glorify") are antonyms within the semantic domain of worship. When someone worships God he glorifies him for his magnificent attributes and deeds. But when someone blasphemes God, he speaks "in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, [and] maligns" God.²¹ God desires all people to worship and glorify him, but when given a warning of eternal judgment, the wicked harden their hearts rather than repent; they blaspheme God rather than honor him.

The four-fold hallelujah (19:1-8)

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 and described in 19:11-21) and just prior to the wedding of the Lamb to his bride, the Church (19:7-8). A vast multitude of redeemed humanity and angels (vv. 1, 4, 6) join together in a deafening shout of praise to God so loud that it sounds like a waterfall and peals of thunder (v. 6). In the midst of this great roar of praise a voice comes from God's throne²² saying, "Give praise to our God, all you His bond-servants, you who fear Him, the small and the great" (v. 5).

The 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 "the small and the great") and that this is to be a practice for life in this world, not just in eternity.

The worship of God by the throng of heavenly beings and redeemed humans sharply contrasts to the actions of the great harlot and those who are under her seductive influence. Rather than worshiping God, the great harlot blasphemes him (17:3) and kills those who worship God (17:6; 19:2); rather than obeying God, she is full of immorality (17:4; 19:2). The great throng of angels and redeemed humans worship God for his righteous judgment of the great harlot, who seeks to turn people from worship and obedience to God (19:2-4).

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.

²¹ BDAG, "βλασφημέω." Louw-Nida's definitions of δοξάζω (domain 33.357) and βλασφημέω (domain 33.400) show that blaspheme and glorify both refer to speaking about someone's attributes, but in opposite senses: δοξάζω means to "speak of something as being unusually fine and deserving honor"; βλασφημέω means "to speak against someone in such a way as to harm or injure his or her reputation."

²² The fact that the command comes "from the throne" shows the divine authorization of the message (cf. David Aune, *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary 52A, ed. David A. Hubbard et al. (Waco, TX: Word, 1997), 1027). However, it is not clear who is giving this command from the throne. It could be God or Christ (Beale, *Revelation*, 930). 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*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1977), 338).

Command to Worship God After the Vision (22:9)

The final command to worship God occurs at a climactic position near the end of the book (22:9). John's angelic guide gives this command just prior to Jesus's promise that he will return quickly (22:7, 12, 14) and after the vision of the new heaven and earth in which believers will dwell closely with God and Christ and worship and serve them forever (21:1-22:5). This final command to worship God alone reinforces the missional theme in the book. As believers await Christ's return, they should worship the true God and avoid worshiping or conforming to the demands of false gods under Satan's dominion.

The Critical Importance of Worshiping Jesus

Revelation strongly stresses that one cannot worship the true God correctly without also worshiping Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The book of Revelation has some of the most powerful depictions of the deity of Christ in the NT. In numerous passages, Jesus is worshiped equally with God the Father (e.g. 5:11-14; 7:9-12; 15:3-4). Jesus is always associated with God in ways no angel ever is, as the one rightfully deserving worship (e.g. 21:22-23; 22:1, 3).²³ "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 worshiped (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 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.

The Cosmic Battle for Worship

The book of Revelation graphically describes the great cosmic battle for allegiance and worship.²⁴ The true God and the victorious Lamb of God continually reign and are being worshiped 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 for all eternity (chaps. 18-22). But Satan, who is symbolized as a great dragon, deceives the world into worshiping false gods and idols. Satan has opposed God's work in this way throughout history (12:9; 20:3).²⁵ Yet Revelation focuses on Satan's last great attempt to control the world and to deceive the world into worshiping 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 the final period 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

²³ The Lamb is "in the center of the throne," which implies that 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).

²⁴ The "cosmic battle for worship" is helpfully described by Nue, 33-34. 221-25.

²⁵ Rev 9:20 probably refers to the ongoing idolatry of humanity, which was in fact demon worship, rather than primarily the eschatological worship of the beast, since the beast was not yet introduced at this point in the vision.

powerful vision, momentarily slips and falls down before his angelic guide, but the angel sharply rebukes him and commands him to worship God alone (19:10; 22:8). These verses remind the reader to choose 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 usually 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 humanity so they worship and glorify him, rather than the true God and his Son.²⁶ 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 (13:4). Everyone whose name is not recorded in the Lamb's book of Life will worship the beast; conversely no one whose name is in the book of Life will worship the beast (13:8).²⁷

Most references to receiving the mark of the beast are associated with worshipping him (14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4; except 13:16-17).²⁸ The mark indicates ownership and 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 (3:12; 7:3; 14:1; 22:4; cf. 9:4 ["the seal of God"]). The mark is either "the name of the beast or the number of his name" (Rev 13:16). The number "666" is described as a human number (13:18), in contrast to the divine name.

In this final conflict, the two choices everyone faces will be 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 failing to worship 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

²⁶ "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 pretense aside and seek worship directly through a man completely conformed to his image." (Ibid., 225).

²⁷ Rev 13:8-10 encourages the readers that if they are truly saved, they will not ultimately fall prey to Satan's deceptive schemes. God will preserve everyone whose name is has been written in the book of Life from the foundation of the world (17:8; cf. 20:12, 15; 21:27). One cannot inadvertently worship the beast or accidentally take on the mark of the beast, since God preserves those who are his people. God has marked them with the name of the Father and the Lamb, which indicates that they belong to God (14:1; cf. 3:12; 7:3; 9:4). "If anyone has an ear, let him hear" (13:9) means that one should pay attention to his important message, since the choice of who a person worships determines his eternal destiny.

²⁸ It is possible that everyone (πάντας, 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 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 worshiped the beast and Satan. It is likely that πάντας in 13:16 refers to all kinds of people, as clarified by the subsequent appositional phrases, "the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves."

worship demanded by Roman emperors in John's time, *the principle is applicable in every age to any competing allegiance to Christ.*²⁹

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 will deceive 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). This is probably the same person as "the man of lawlessness" in 2 Thess. 2:4, who also will compel absolute worship, embody the full power of Satan, perform false miracles, and deceive 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). His authority 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 self-glorification rather than God glorification (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). In this eschatological time, Satan's influence will be nearly universal. 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 redeems 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 repeated phrase "it was given to him" (ἐδόθη αὐτῷ) expresses the limits of God's permission: For example, "the authority to act for forty-two months was given to him" (13:5; cf. v. 7, 14, 15).³⁰ 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 to destroy God's people, God continues to reign and to be worshiped in heaven. Soon evil will be eradicated and God will be worshiped, 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 Jesus Christ, or he will worship and glorify Satan, who is the true power behind all false gods and counterfeit religious systems (13:2-4). The "eternal gospel" calls all people to

²⁹ 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.)

³⁰ The expression "it was given to him..." (ἐδόθη, 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.)

“fear God, and give Him glory” (Rev 14:7). “Every human being will worship something, and this choice determines one’s eternal destiny.”³¹ People were made to worship. Either a person will worship the true God or he will worship a counterfeit (cf. Rom 1:25). God alone is worthy of worship because he 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.”³²

Revelation makes it clear that true worship is not simply an occasional liturgical act or verbal expression of praise. 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. When one turns from sin to God, he turns from his false gods and acknowledges 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. Matt 4:8-10).³³

True worship requires a life of a moral purity – a 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. It is a contradiction in terms to declare “to Him be the glory and dominion” (1:6; cf. 4:11), while not living for his glory and submitting to his reign over every aspect of one’s life. This is why Christ rebukes moral impurity 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.³⁴ Since true righteousness comes from Christ (3:18), the righteousness of believers brings glory to God and is thus an act of worship.

God is also worshiped through service to Christ, which glorifies him both now and throughout eternity (7:14-15; 22:3).³⁵ God has made believers to be a kingdom of priests, who will eternally serve God and reign with Christ (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 people who will join the multitudes praising his name for all eternity.

³¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 47.

³² Peterson, *Engaging*, 262.

³³ *Ibid.*, 265.

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ The Greek word *λατρεύω* has the double meaning of “to worship” and “to serve,” particularly in relationship to religious activities. Cf. BDAG, *λατρεύω*.

Conclusion

The importance of worship is a central part of the message of the book of Revelation. All people are to worship God alone and to forsake honoring any false god or other created being. This theme is stressed through numerous heavenly scenes where angels and redeemed people worship God. Repeated commands to worship God alone are placed at strategic positions in the book, including the climactic command just after the apocalyptic vision.

The essence of the Gospel is the call to “fear God, and give Him glory” (14:7). The Gospel calls people not just to accept Christ’s payment for their sins, but also to reorient their life under the authority of Jesus Christ and thus to live each day for his glory. Since God will not share his glory with anyone else, God calls for undivided allegiance to him and will judge the worship of false gods. God wants all people to repent from blaspheming him through their words and actions and to turn to glorifying him both verbally and through their righteous behavior.

While believers await Christ’s return, they are expected to worship the one true God and to avoid worship of and conformity to the demands of false gods, all of which are under Satan’s dominion. Remaining faithful 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. Worshiping God today is a preparation for the eternal future of God’s people, who will live in an intimate relationship with God and Jesus Christ in the new heavens and new earth, where they will worship and serve them forever.