

ALL THINGS NEW

Revelation 21.1-5

Have you heard of the *Voynich Manuscript*? It is a 20th century enigma. It is a 204 page illustrated manuscript in an unknown alphabet from the 15th or 16th century. It is 7x10 inches in size. It was purchased in 1912 by a British book dealer, who gave copies to anyone wanting to decipher it. Many tried and failed. In 1921 a professor from the University of Pennsylvania announced he had broken the code. The manuscript he said is the work of Roger Bacon, the 15th century inventor. His findings made him a celebrity among scholars for a time, but later evidence disproved his theory. In 1969 the manuscript was given to Yale University, where it remains undeciphered, code unbroken, an enigma to all who study it.

The New Testament book *The Revelation to John* or *Revelation* is a similar enigma for biblical interpreters. I am amused by Ambrose Bierce's tongue-in-cheek definition of it in his book *The Devil's Dictionary*: (1)

REVELATION, n. A famous book in which St. John the Divine concealed all he knew. The revealing is done by commentators, who know nothing.

As I begin a sermon on Revelation, I'd better take Bierce's words to heart. Commentators have been deciphering John's Revelation for centuries with contradictory results. It's not true that John "concealed all he knew." He wrote to be understood and edifying. He pronounced blessings on "*the one who reads the words of this prophecy*" and "*those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.*"

Images from *Revelation* are part of our cultural parlance. We speak of the possibility of a nuclear attack as “Armageddon.” Books and movies make use of *Revelation*’s 666. (2) If you read this ancient and enigmatic book attentively and resist the popular tendency to trivialize it, you can receive a message of great depth and hope, as John, the author, promises.

READ THE TEXT: REVELATION 21.1-5

There is a story of a woman who was desperately trying to find Christ. One night she had a dream in which she was standing before a thick pane of glass. She could see Christ standing on the other side. She called out to him, seemingly to no avail. She began to speak louder and louder with no response. So she began to scream and pound violently on the glass. Just then she heard a voice coming from above, below, and around her. It said, “Make no fuss. There is nothing between us.”

Revelation is an account of a dream or vision of John. He encounters the risen Christ and is commanded by a voice to write to seven churches in present-day Turkey. During the persecution of Christians in the 1st century, John was exiled to the isle of Patmos off the coast of Turkey by Emperor Nero or Domitian. His vision came to him on a Sunday morning.

It begins with the appearance of the resurrected Jesus Christ. He stands majestic before John. Snow-white hair, eyes of fire, feet of polished bronze, his face shining as bright as noontime sun. John falls at his feet in awe and fear. “*Don’t be afraid,*” Jesus says. “*I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive.*”

Then he adds with divine authority, “*I have the keys of Death and Hades.*” The message is meant to be clear to all who read this book: tyrants of Sin and Death and Hell have no lasting power. God raises the dead. He started with Jesus and will continue with us. Do not fear.

N.T. Wright says, “The vision of Jesus serves as the magnificent gilded portico into (*Revelation*).” (3) Then *Revelation* shifts to a second introduction in the form of letters to seven churches in Turkey. They faced the tyranny of sin within and of Rome without. Through John, Christ calls them to remain faithful and warns of consequences of infidelity. Wright says these letters serve as a corridor that leads to the throne room of God, which we reach in chapter four. (4)

John writes: “*I looked and there in heaven a door stood open! A Voice rang out and said: ‘Come up here!’*” He goes through the door and sees God with all creation paying God homage. There is a rainbow of colors. God’s throne is surrounded by twenty-four elders in white robes and golden crowns. From God’s throne come flames of lighting and peals of thunder. Torches burn around God. Earth’s creatures sing:

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty...
You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power...*

Then something occurs that disturbs John. The one on the throne has a scroll in his hand. It is sealed shut. The scroll is God’s plan of salvation; it’s God’s divine purpose for recreating the entire cosmos. Someone has to open the scroll, but no one can do it. John says:

I began to weep bitterly, because no one was found to open the scroll or look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. Then (John continues) I saw... a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered...

This is the gospel in metaphorical language. Jesus of Nazareth is the Lion of Judah and the Root of David, who has become the sacrificial lamb. By his death and resurrection he has defeated the tyrants of sin, terror, and death. Now, through him, God's plan of salvation can be unrolled and completed.

To people suffering the tyranny of Rome this was great good news. To people suffering cancer, job loss, divorce, addiction, injustice, oppression, or violence, it still is. *Revelation's* message is as hopeful in the 21st century as it was in the 1st.

The scene concludes with every living creature singing a song of praise to Christ. *"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wisdom, riches and strength, honor and majesty, and blessing."* Imagine every creature alive – apes and alpacas, birds and bats, goats and gators, lions and lizards, as well as children and adults – singing this extraordinary song to Jesus. It is a celebration of the beginning of God's promise to unite heaven and earth in new life for all.

What does the scroll reveal? The middle chapters of *Revelation* feature tumults and battles in highly symbolic language. John's vision unfolds like the kind of dream from

which one awakes and declares, “I had the strangest dream last night!” These chapters feature symbolic numbers and creatures. For centuries people have been erroneously, and sometimes foolishly, applying them to contemporary persons and events. The most common number is seven. There are seven churches, spirits before God’s throne, and golden lamp stands; and seven stars, horns, and eyes on the Lamb; and seven seals, trumpets, and bowls; and seven thunders, heads and crowns on the dragon; and seven angels, plagues, and heads on the beast; and seven hills in the city (Rome) and kings of the earth. In scripture the number seven often indicates completeness.

In chapter 13, John tells of a beast numbered 666, which is called the **anti-Christ**. In the 20th century the title has been assigned to Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. In recent years, Osama Bin Laden was accorded the title. Most likely it was meant to represent Emperor Nero in coded language. Nero was a horrific persecutor of 1st century Christians. Numbers were often substituted for letters in the ancient world and the Hebrew letters which spell “Caesar Nero” add up to 666. (5)

It all leads to the great victory of the Lamb over Babylon, the tyrannous city that has opposed God and his purposes. The last two chapters of Revelation present a vision of God’s holy city, which eliminates Babylon and takes its place. It is a glorious vision of a world reborn.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I

heard a loud voice from throne saying, "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

Many times people express their future hope of leaving this world and going to another place, to heaven. But here, in the climax of John's vision, heaven comes to earth. It is a vivid fulfillment of our prayer: "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" Our ultimate destiny is not to be disembodied spirits in an ethereal dimension called heaven. Nor is the destiny of this world God made and loves to be thrown away or abandoned. It's the tyrants of Sin and Death that want to destroy the world. God plans to recreate it. (6)

The recreated earth will lack several things, however.

There will be no bombs or bullets; no concentration camps or refugee resettlements; no illegal aliens or racial ghettos. As *Revelation* insists, there will be no Temple anymore because there will be no need to house God. God will be all in all. There will be no sea, because in *Revelation* the sea symbolizes the place from which evil emerges. There will be no sin, nothing to tarnish or deface the image of God within us. No falsehood, theft, or murder. No pain, death, or mourning. God will wipe every tear from every eye, because God will remove all causes of fear and crying.

All of this is possible, says John, because of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, whom John calls "*the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*" All of this is offered to us. As a

grand finale, the final verses of *Revelation* feature Jesus speaking. He says;

*I am the root and descendant of David,
The bright morning star...
Let everyone who hears say, "Come."
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let everyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.*

This strange, enigmatic book, with a code seemingly impossible to crack, offers readers a wonder-full hope. It insists God is sovereign, in control, with a benevolent purpose for us. Through Jesus Christ, the Lamb who slain, God will conquer evil and create a new heaven and earth in which we will dwell with God forever.

In the meantime we are to worship God as we will then. The image of heavenly worship in chapter 4 calls us to prepare for worship then by worshipping now with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In the meantime we are to stand up to tyrants or antichrists, knowing that God will subdue their power and subvert their purposes for his own. This is true whether the tyrant is without us or within us. All tyrants -- political, psychological, economic, physiological, or spiritual -- will fall before God. We are to face them now with all the courage, strength, and grace we can muster.

In the meantime we are to dry each others' tears until the hand of God dries them for good. Jesus calls us to follow him to any place where tears of sorrow and despair may flow. He calls us to open our hearts to any in pain,

bereavement, illness, or loss, and to comfort them in his stead.

In the meantime in all we do, think, and say, we are to remember that the day comes when every mountain and valley, tree and shrub, river and waterfall, animal and person will join to sing:

*Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...
to receive power and riches and wisdom
and strength and honor and glory and blessing.
To him who sits on the throne of the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and power
forever and ever. Amen.*

Sources:

1. As found in *Revelation*, J. Ramsey Michaels, IVP, p.13
2. Ibid, p. 14
3. N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus*, Eerdmans, p. 55. I am using Wright extensively for this sermon.
4. Ibid, p. 56
5. *The Essential Bible Companion*, Zondervan, p. 131
6. Wright, cited above, p. 60