



Persecuted Yet Vibrant With Life: Some Insights from the Book of Revelation¹

ABSTRACT

This article aims to decode the symbolic language, images, numbers, and colors in the book of Revelation to unearth its message of hope and the role of prayers in the life of the early Christians. The author exhorts the early Christians to persevere in their faith in spite of tribulations and persecution through prayers and constant praise to God. It is through their prayers that their hope in the living God was concretely expressed. Hopefully, the early Christians' example can serve as a model for us who are facing the present pandemic in addition to natural calamities which have hit our country in the past months.

Keywords: Revelation; Apocalyptic Literature; Tribulation; Hymns of Praise; Community of Hope

PRELIMINARIES

My survey has shown that the book of Revelation is one of the least read book in the Bible. Some of the reasons are: the fearful symbols which are difficult to decipher as well as its literary genre. Thus, this presentation has three parts and a conclusion: the first

¹This article was presented during the webinar sponsored by the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines held last November 13-14, 2020.



part is a short introduction on the book's historical setting, date and place of composition, some literary features, general outline of the book, author and audience; the second part gives short explanations on the meaning of the different symbolic language, numbers, colors, and images; and the third part examines some significant verses from the book and draws some insights which could serve as a light for our life during this pandemic and series of natural calamities.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Historical setting

Domitian's reign is the most likely political background of Revelation. Domitian has been characterized as megalomaniac and tyrannical. He is said to have fostered the imperial cult and encouraged the use of the divine title *Dominus et Deus*, Lord and God, in addressing him.

There was widespread oppression and persecution of Christians in Asia then. This accounts for the anti-Roman stance of Revelation and for the book's emphasis on "tribulation," understood as active persecution.

1.2. Place and date of composition

In Revelation 1:9, the author of the book narrates that he received his visions while he was residing at Patmos, a small island in Aegean Sea. Some locate this work in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Scholars agree that this book was written after 90 CE, towards the end of the reign of Domitian in 81-96 CE. The reason for this is the author's use of Babylon instead of Rome in 18:2. The term Babylon was used to describe Rome after Roman armies had destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE. This makes the book of Revelation as one among the latest books composed in the New Testament.

1.3. *Literary features*

The opening verses of the book of Revelation tell us its literary genre: it is a revelation (a,poka,luyis, apokalypsis 1:1); a prophecy (profhteia 1:3; 22:7.10.18-19); and a letter addressed to the seven churches in Asia from Jesus Christ to whom they give glory and power forever (1:4-6).

The book opens with a doxology to Jesus Christ (1:4-6) and concludes with a prayer for him to come (22:20), with an invocation of grace for all (22:21). The book opens and concludes with a prayer.

It contains many symbols and images. The symbols were taken by the author from his context, namely, the Greco-Roman context and the Hebrew scriptures.

1.4. *General outline of the book*

The book appears as a unitary composition, preceded by a prologue, 1:1-4, concluded by an epilogue, 22:6-21. We have here an inclusion: the book opens and concludes with a prayer,

1:4-6 - A doxology to Jesus Christ and an invocation of grace for the addressees

22:20-21- A prayer for the Lord to come, with an invocation of grace for all.

General Structure

Prologue 1:1-3

First part, 1:4-3:22, seven letters to the churches

Second part, 4:1-22:5, is complex; it can be divided into five sections

1. 4:1-5:14 Introductory section: vision of the throne, the Lamb, the giving of the book with the 7 seals
2. 6:1-7:17 section of the seals
 - progressive opening of the first 6 seals by the lamb
 - the 7th seal encompasses the following part

3. 8:1-11:14 section of the trumpets
 - successive blowing of the first 6 trumpets
 - 3 “woes” with the last three trumpets, creating a climate of literary tension (8:13).
 - The 7th trumpet encompasses the next part;
4. 11:15-16:16 the most complex section; may be called “section of the 3 signs”
 - (1) the woman (12:1)
 - (2) the dragon (12:3)
 - (3) the angels with 7 bowls (15:1ff.); the 7th bowl encompasses the next section
5. 16:17-22:5 the concluding section

Presentation of the “great day” of the final intervention of Christ, who:

 - Judges, annihilates all hostile forces
 - Prepares and realizes the triumph of the “bride,” the heavenly Jerusalem.

Epilogue 22:6-21

The five sections are linked with each other by a linear, temporal and progressive development, a continuous growth that concludes with a prayer in the final conclusion. The conflict between the positive and negative forces is of “metahistorical” character.”

1.5. Author and audience

Until now, there is no conclusive and unanimous agreement among scholars on who the author of the book of Revelation is. Whoever he or she is, what matters is that the book of Revelation is accepted by the Church in the canon, so it is normative for our faith and morals.

The author is an intellectual, a well-educated person with exceptional personality. He is not a master of Greek, but knows the language and he uses rich vocabulary.

The audience, however, is clearly mentioned in 1:11, that is, the seven churches in Asia Minor, who are experiencing persecuted (6:10).

II. DIFFERENT SYMBOLS

- *Cosmic disorders*: black sun, moon becoming blood, stars falling, earthquakes, devastation. These symbolize immediate presence of God in history. This same presence we shall experience if ever such events would really happen.
- “*Teratomorphic*” *symbolism*: lamb, lion, horses, grasshoppers, the two monsters, etc. This symbolism represents positive or negative intervention of animals as protagonists of events, e.g., the beast symbolizes the Emperor and the Roman empire (13:2); the lamb symbolizes Christ (5:6).
- *Arithmetical symbolism* refers to numbers normally have a qualitative value that goes beyond pure quantity.
 - 7 and its multiples mean totality, completeness, wholeness
 - 1000 means qualitative belonging to God
 - 3½ and fractions means generally, partiality, imperfection, limitation
- *Chromatic symbolism* shows that colors have their own significance.
 - White signifies belonging to a supernatural world, with probable reference to the resurrection (19:11-16).
 - Red represents violence and bloodshed.
 - Scarlet represents loyalty.
 - Black signifies famine.
 - Pale green symbolizes death.
 - Purple signifies royalty.

- *Generic OT symbolism*
 - heaven means transcendence of God, divine realm
 - earth means typical level of man, realm for man
 - air means an ideal zone of the forces above man but below God
 - vintage means eschatological judgment of condemnation
 - harvest means eschatological reward.

III. SIGNIFICANT VERSES

The first three verses indicate that the book is to be read aloud and heard all at once in the context of worship (1:1-3). Verse 3 pronounces a blessing on the lector who reads the book in the worship services of the Asian churches.

Several texts in the book of Revelation are prayed in the Roman breviary, canticles at vespers, while some are read at Holy Mass.² We find in the book of Revelation an interplay between description of tribulations and hymns of praises. Amidst persecution, the Christians find strength and comfort in prayers, not of laments however, but of praise to the Lord.

Let us examine some of these texts.

After the letters to the seven churches in Asia (2:1-3:22), is a vision of heavenly worship wherein around the throne are seated twenty-four elders in white garments and with gold crowns on their head. There were also four living creatures: the first creature resembled a lion, the second was like a calf, the third had a human face, and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. These four living creatures do not stop exclaiming: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come...Worthy are you, Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things; because of your will they came to be and were created” (4:8.11).

²Christ the King (34th Sunday in Ordinary time, Cycle B), 2nd to 7th Sundays of Easter, Cycle C.

The next heavenly vision is a slain Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into the whole world (5:6). When the Lamb took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before him and sang a new hymn:

“Worthy are you to receive the scroll and to break open its seals, for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they will reign on earth... Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing... To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever... Amen” (5:9-10.12-14).³

The sixth chapter of the book describes the opening of the first six seals. Four horses of different colors came out when the five seals were opened: first, white; second, red; third, black; fourth, pale green. The breaking of the fifth seal showed underneath the altar souls of those who had been slaughtered because of their witness to the word of God (6:1-11). When the sixth seal was broken, there was a great earthquake, the sun turned as black as dark sackcloth and the whole moon became like blood. There was great turmoil on the face of the earth so that the peoples, including the kings, nobles, and military officers hid themselves in caves and mountain crags. But this catastrophe is followed by the triumphant song of a great multitude from every nation, race, people and tongue:

“Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb... Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen” (7:10.12).

³The biblical texts are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, Catholic Student's Edition, (Makati City: St. Pauls, 2000).

The people who sang this triumphant song are “the ones who have survived the great persecution;”⁴

After defeat of the dragon in the war in heaven, a loud voice in heaven says:

“Now have salvation and power come, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed. For the accuser of our brothers is cast out, who accuses them before our God day and night. They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death. Therefore, rejoice, you heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to you, earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great fury, for he knows he has but a short time” (12:10-12).

The vision of the seventh plague is followed by a song of those who won the victory over the beast:

“Great and wonderful are your works, Lord God almighty. Just and true are your ways, O king of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, or glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All the nations will come and worship before you, For your righteous acts have been revealed” (15:3-4).

With the fall of Babylon, actually referring to Rome, a great rejoicing follows with the following hymn:

“Alleluia! Salvation, glory, and might belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her harlotry. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants...Alleluia! Smoke will rise from her forever and ever...Praise our God, all you his servants, and you who revere him, small and great ...Alleluia! The Lord has established his reign, our God, the almighty. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory.

⁴The translation in *NRSV* is “great ordeal,” in *NABRE* “great distress.”

For the wedding day of the Lamb has come, his bride has made herself ready. She was allowed to wear a bright, clean linen garment” (19:1-3.5.6b-8).

IV. SYNTHESIS

The book of Revelation, written during the time of great persecution under Domitian, a tyrannical emperor, gives emphasis on great tribulation which paints a picture of active persecution of the early Christians. In spite of this life-threatening situation, the book is replete with hymns of praise as seen above. Chapter 4 presents a perfect picture of kingship and the perfect liturgical worship.⁵ The dirges in 18:1-24 are balanced by alleluias and songs of praise in 19:1-8, which precede the appearance of the rider on the white horse,⁶ identified as “the Word of God” (19:13).

The vision of the new heaven, new earth and the new Jerusalem (21:1-27) shows that the early Christians persevered in praising the Lord in spite of the tribulations. The early Christians’ hope is concretely expressed in their hymns of praise, which is their response in the midst of tribulations and persecutions

As an apocalyptic literature, the book gives hope to the suffering Christians that at the end, God will reign and the oppressors will be utterly destroyed (11:17-18; 19:17-21). God himself will “guide them to springs of the water of life and will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (7:17)...death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more: (21:4).

RELEVANCE

At present we are experiencing great tribulations caused by the corona virus pandemic and the recent typhoons which came one after another. These have caused worldwide crisis. Social media provide us with a lot of information on the effects of these calamities, mostly negative and depressive.

⁵J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation. Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible (Garden City: New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975), 81.

⁶Ibid., 315.

The Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle said that the present pandemic can be a new Pentecost for us.

The book of Revelation can show us a more positive response to the present “tribulations.” Let us take refuge in the God of heaven and earth and sing him hymns of praise instead of dirges. This may sound impractical but the experiences of the early Christians have proven that it was an effective way. This has kept the Church vibrant until now in spite of the many tribulations the Church has had encountered throughout the centuries.

Let me conclude with a question for you and me to answer:
How can we become a community vibrant with life in spite of the present tribulations we are experiencing?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Student’s Edition. Makati City: St. Pauls, 2000.

Commentaries

Boring, Eugene. Revelation. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. USA: John Knox Press, 1989.

Cory, Catherine. The Book of Revelation. Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2006.

Kugler, Hartin. An Introduction to the Bible. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009.

Massyngberde Ford, J. Revelation. Introduction, Translation and Commentary. The Anchor Bible. Garden City: New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975.