

# Songs in the Night

What are we to make of the Book of Revelation? It begins and ends like an ancient letter (1:4-7; 21:21). It calls itself a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19). It contains edicts from the risen Christ (2:1—3:22) to seven long-gone local Christian congregations of western Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Its sevenfold series of seven-part visions—whether of hope for the faithful or of doom for the impenitent—provides its story line—a surreal narrative populated by bizarre characters and grotesque imagery. Scattered strategically throughout this dark and alien literary-landscape is a series of seven antiphonal hymns (4:8-11; 5:9-14; 7:9-12; 11:15-18; 16:5-7; 19:1-4, 5-8). What are we to make of these songs in the night?

Part of our difficulty in reading Revelation is inherent in its origin in the visionary experiences of John. How was he to turn his indescribable, Technicolor visions of unseen divine realities into black words on white papyrus? He had no choice but to resort to the language and imagery of his cultural, religious, geographical, political, and literary environment.

Although Revelation includes no direct quotations from the Old Testament, no other New Testament book makes more allusions to it. Few modern readers are familiar with Old Testament symbolism and numerology. Fewer still are experts in the late 1st-century Greco-Roman world standing behind the text of Revelation. So, much that was obvious to John's first readers mystifies us.

For example, the chorus in ancient Greek dramas interpreted the actions of gods and mortals dramatized on multi-level stages. The 24,000-seat amphitheater at Ephesus was widely known for its seven-window scenic backdrops—settings for plays with actors robed in elaborate costumes, wearing grotesque masks—and its 24-member chorus. Could Revelation's first readers have missed the parallels? Surely, the hymns of the 24 elders were recognized as poetic explanations for its visionary dramas.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the strangeness of Revelation for us arises from its unique "apocalyptic" genre. This designation derives from its opening word in Greek (*apokalypsis*). Apocalyptic helpfully identifies dozens of similar Jewish, Christian, and pagan literary works written between the second century B.C. and fourth century A.D.<sup>2</sup> But to describe Revelation as apocalyptic—"like Revelation"—is of no help.

We know how to read narratives (like the Gospels and Acts) and letters and sermons (like the other New Testament books). But how are we to make sense of a genre whose nearest contemporary analogies are perhaps science fiction and fantasy literature?

What are we to make of the Book of Revelation? Most of us who grew up in the church during the second half of the 20th-century have vivid youthful memories of itinerant prophecy gurus and their giant charts of end-times events stretched across the front of the sanctuary. Their self-assured predictions were allegedly based on the book of "Revelations." If we hadn't been so naive and frightened, we might have realized that those who couldn't even get the title right were probably not as qualified to interpret the book as they claimed.

They played on our contempt for Catholics; our concerns about Communism, cold war, and intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with thermonuclear warheads; our conceit that America was a Christian nation; and our confusion about Revelation. And, of course, their overly confident predictions were all mistaken. John F. Kennedy did not turn out to be the Antichrist, after all. Nor did Pope John XXIII, Nikita Khrushchev, Henry Kissinger, or Saddam Hussein.

But the delusional doomsayers were long gone, inflicting their revised theories on another unsuspecting congregation, before we realized we had been duped. Eventually, most of us cynically stopped believing such self-proclaimed prophecy-experts. Unfortunately, many of us also stopped reading Revelation. For despite their failed interpretations, these supposed authorities succeeded in turning the imagery of Revelation into the scenery of our nightmares. They turned a book God intended to encourage 1st-century believers into a book that scared the devil out of 20th-century believers.

In the process, we let the whackos hijack the blessed Christian hope. Because of the craziness of so much that has been said about the Second Coming in "popular" circles, many saner voices have grown silent. This silence has given consent to more lunacy. And so, for many, Revelation effectively ceases to function as a part of the Christian canon of Scripture.

The phenomenal publishing successes of *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind*-series suggest that many Christians and non-Christians are still curious about the enigmatic Book of Revelation. Unfortunately, too many have been willing to accept such latter-day speculations, unimagined by any Christian before 1830. These books ignore one incontestable principle of sound interpretation: A book cannot mean what it could never have meant to its author or first readers.<sup>3</sup>

Average readers of the Bible are surprised to learn that the word "Antichrist" nowhere appears in Revelation. It appears only in 1 and 2 John, which insist there are many antichrists, who had already come by the time these books were written. Few realize that the word "Rapture" appears nowhere in the Bible. Most seem unaware that none of the ancient Christian creeds require us to accept extra-biblical end-times schemes.<sup>4</sup>

"Prophecy books," which claim to have cracked Revelation's supposedly "secret code," fundamentally misunderstand it as the script of history written cryptically in advance. Despite their claims, the task of readers of Revelation is NOT to discover the true identity of its bizarre characters and fantastic events so we'll know where we are in the countdown to Armageddon.

Revelation was intended to be savored, not dissected—to be read aloud and heard in public worship (1:3). Its imagery evokes an alternative vision of reality. With its message ringing in their ears and its songs in their hearts, beleaguered believers were emboldened to return to the world where the Evil Empire's beastly power seemed invincible, persuaded of the ironic power of self-sacrificing love: The slaughtered Lamb wins!

Despite the daunting challenges Revelation presents

modern Western interpreters, this much is clear: Since the first coming of Christ, God reigns unchallenged in heaven. And despite appearances to the contrary on earth, God wins in the end.

But what are we to do between the times? How should we celebrate God's present reign in heaven as we await His future reign on earth? Revelation challenges us to pray, live holy lives, steadfastly and peacefully resist compromise with evil, worship God, sing hymns, and share sacramental meals together. In other words, we are to be the church of Jesus Christ!

We are not about to embark on a study of revelations of the last days, but of "the revelation of Jesus Christ." The word "revelation" appears in the book only in Revelation 1:1. And it is all about Christ!

What should characterize the church whose foundational conviction is that God has been definitively revealed in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth—crucified, risen, and reigning? We sing songs of hope even—no, especially—in the darkness of a world in re-

bellion against its Creator, Redeemer, and rightful Lord.

1. See James L. Blevins, *Revelation as Drama* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1984).

2. Reading some of these apocryphal apocalypses (see [http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical\\_studies/noncanon/index.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/index.htm), accessed 03/27/08) will make Revelation seem much more intelligible by comparison.

3. See H. Ray Dunning, ed., *The Second Coming: A Wesleyan Approach to the Doctrine of Last Things* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1995), especially the chapter by William Miller on "The New Apocalypticism." See also George Lyons, *Listening for God Through Revelation*, Lectio Divina Bible Studies (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2006).

4. Similarly, Article XV in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene simply affirms: "We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ will come again . . ." (adding only a paraphrase of 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

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## Our Mission

1. We recognize the mutually supportive roles of the adult Sunday School, namely nurture, fellowship, and outreach.  
**Nurture:** The personal and spiritual growth of the individual through ongoing encounters with God's Word within a community of believers.  
**Fellowship:** Building caring and supportive relationships between adults.  
**Outreach:** Reaching beyond the group-setting to others outside through evangelism, service, and personal application of session truths.
2. WordAction curriculum is committed to a twofold emphasis of both content learning (Word) and life change based on that encounter with the Word (Action).
3. WordAction curriculum is distinctly Wesleyan-Holiness in theological perspective in selection of scripture themes and presentation.
4. We seek to provide the tools and confidence for adults to read, understand, and live by God's Word.
5. This curriculum explores the Bible in its variety of scope, literature, and themes.
6. The Bible is lifted up as the fundamental, legitimate, and practical authority and guide for living today.
7. We desire to allow the powerful Word of God to speak for itself as adults discover its message, understanding its proper context and application.
8. These materials show that the Bible tells a unified and comprehensive story of God's gracious interaction with people throughout history.
9. Encouragement is given to provide an environment where emphasis is placed on discovering God's Word within a community of believers in contrast to an individual-only course of study.
10. Knowing that adults learn through a variety of learning styles, this curriculum encourages a variety of presentation methodologies.
11. We desire to assist the adult leader in personal spiritual growth and excellence in facilitating group growth.
12. The importance of daily individual study of God's Word through Scripture memorization and reading is emphasized each week.