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“A Theology of the Hymns in Revelation”

Les Hardin
Professor of New Testament
Johnson University Florida

In 1843 Alexander Campbell wrote of the hymns of the church:

“The Christian Hymn book, next to the Bible ... wields the largest and mightiest formative influence upon the young and old, upon saint and sinner... of any other book in the world. ... Permit me, I also say, to dispense the psalmody of a community, and I care not who dictates its creed or writes its catechism. If the hymn book is daily sung in the family, and in the social meetings of the brethren, it must imbue their souls with its sentiments more than all the other labors of the pulpit or of the press.”¹

The songs we sing in the ceremony and liturgy of the church are of critical importance. If the songs do in fact wield “the largest and mightiest formative influence” outside of Scripture, then it is imperative that those songs be founded upon solid, biblical theology.

The highest concentration of hymns and worship material in the New Testament appears in the book of Revelation. Ceremonial worship elements are woven throughout the book in high concentrations.² The main term “worship” (προσκυνέω) appears twenty-four times,³ alongside related terms such as “Hallelujah!” (19:1, 3, 6), “Amen,” (5:14, 7:12, 19:4), “praise” (αἰνέω, 19:5), and “rejoice.”⁴ Harps (5:8, 15:2, 18:22), palm branches (used for celebration; 7:9), incense offered at the altar (8:3-4), responses from the altar (16:7), the prominence of Temple imagery

¹ Alexander Campbell, *The Millennial Harbinger* (1843), 131.

² For a thorough discussion of the liturgical elements see W. Hulitt Gloer, “Worship God! Liturgical Elements in the Apocalypse,” *Review and Expositor* 98 (2001): 35-57; Craig R. Koester, “The Distant Triumph Song: Music and the Book of Revelation,” *Word and World* 12 (1992): 243-249.

³ Fourteen times in reference to the worship of God: 3:9, 4:10, 5:14, 7:11, 9:20, 11:1, 11:16, 14:7, 15:4, 19:4, 19:10, 22:8-9; nine times in reference to worship of the dragon (13:4) or beast (13:4, 13:8, 13:12, 13:15, 14:9, 14:11, 16:2, 19:20); and once describing the faithful as “those who did not worship the beast” (20:4).

⁴ The terms translated “rejoice” in the NIV are varied: χαίρω (11:10, 19:7); εὐφραίνω (12:12, 18:20), and ἀγαλλιάω (19:7).

(3:12, 11:1-6, 21:16-17), and the singing of a “new song” (5:9, 14:3; cf. 15:3) all serve as props to highlight the worship that pervades this book.

Of major interest to scholars over the last several decades are the *hymns* of the Apocalypse. A survey of the literature reveals a wide range of interests. A generation ago the descendants of the source critics found it necessary to determine whether or not John⁵ borrowed, adapted, and refashioned these hymns from the liturgical elements of the synagogue or early Christian worship,⁶ or composed them as integral components of his own view of the exalted Christ.⁷ More recently the discussion has turned toward the worship scene in Rev. 4-5, and whether those chapters depict a single, unified vision.⁸ Recent emphasis on the politics of Revelation has renewed interest in the ceremony of the imperial court and its influence on John’s depiction of worship, particularly in Rev. 4-5.⁹

Left rather undeveloped in the scholarly literature is the *theology* of the hymns and what that theology contributes to the church’s structure and practice of worship. The two most notable

⁵ The author identifies himself as John in 1:4, 1:9, 22:8. The debate about the authorship of Revelation will be neither hindered nor helped by me referring to him as “John” in this essay.

⁶ O. A. Piper, “The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Ancient Church,” *Church History* 20 (1951): 10-22; Lucetta Mowry, “Revelation 4-5 and Early Christian Usage,” *JBL* 72 (1951): 75-84, believed they were a composite of Jewish and Christian liturgies; John O’Rourke, “The Hymns of the Apocalypse,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 399-409; Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, ed. R. R. Reno (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 80-81. Massey Shepherd, *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960), 75-97, believed that the Apocalypse was constructed along the lines of the first-century Passover liturgy.

⁷ L. W. Hurtado, “Revelation 4-5 in the Light of the Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies,” *JSNT* 25 (1985): 105-124; D. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52a (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 315-316; Robert H. Smith, “‘Worthy is the Lamb’ and Other Songs of Revelation,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25 (1998): 504: “the hymns of Revelation have not simply evolved gradually and peacefully out of temple and synagogue patterns.”; David R. Carnegie, “Worthy is the Lamb: The Hymns in Revelation,” in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. H. H. Rowdon (InterVarsity, 1982), 246-247, argues that the vocabulary of the hymns is too similar to the corpus of Revelation to be an interpolation from outside sources.

⁸ Christopher Rowland, “The Visions of God in Apocalyptic Literature,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 10 (1979): 145, has suggested that Rev. 5 is the Christianized version of worship that transforms the Christ-less Jewish vision of Rev. 4. For rather convincing views to the contrary, see L. Stuckenbruck, “Revelation 4-5: Divided Worship or One Vision?” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 14 (2011): 235-248; Hurtado, “Revelation 4-5.”

⁹ So D. Aune, “The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John,” *Biblical Research* 29 (1983): 5-26; J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010), 82-107.

essays are those by David Carnegie¹⁰ and Stephen Horn.¹¹ Carnegie focused mostly on whether John authored the hymns, their connection to Isaiah 40-55, and their latent anti-imperial Christology. Horn's essay, on the surface, promises to deliver a theology of the hymns, but rather winds up constituting a song-by-song exegesis of the texts in question. In the end, he devotes less than two pages to theological reflection. R. Morton concluded his study of the hymns of Revelation with a sketch of their theology, but only focused on the sovereignty of God and the supremacy of Christ as an affront to the pseudo-sovereignty of the Roman emperor.¹²

What follows here are some initial investigations toward a systematic theology of the hymns. If the worship scenes in Revelation reveal the paradigm for the worshipping community on earth, how do they inform the theology, practice, and use of our hymnody? What do they teach us about God's place in the universe, Jesus' co-regency with him, the language of our worship songs, and the call to repentance that they call for?

IDENTIFICATION OF THE HYMNS

The hymns of the Apocalypse are notoriously difficult to define and categorize. Explicit mention of singing appears only three times in Revelation, with varying degrees of specificity. The twenty-four elders sang a new song before the throne, lyrics included: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (5:9-10). The

¹⁰ Carnegie, "Worthy is the Lamb."

¹¹ Stephen N. Horn, "Hallelujah, the Lord our God, the Almighty Reigns: The Theology of the Hymns of Revelation," in *Essays on Revelation: Appropriating Yesterday's Apocalypse in Today's World*, ed. Gerald L. Stevens (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 41-53.

¹² R. Morton, "Glory to God and to the Lamb: John's Use of Jewish and Hellenistic/Roman Themes in Formatting His Theology in Revelation 4-5," *JSNT* 83 (2001): 105-108.

144,000 sang a new song before the throne (14:3). The content is not given, but parallels the singing of those who were victorious over the beast (15:3) who sang the Song of Moses, and of the Lamb: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (15:3-4). These are the only explicit references in Revelation to singing, making the identification of the hymn material more difficult.

J. O’Rourke identified three categories of hymns in the Apocalypse: doxologies (1:6, 5:13, 7:12), acclamations of worthiness (4:11, 5:9, 12), and the *treishagion* (“Holy, holy, holy”; 4:8).¹³ His categorization left out several key texts in which praise and adoration are directed toward God (7:10, 11:15, 11:17-18, 12:10-12, 15:3-4, 16:5-7, 19:1-3, 19:5, 19:6-8). Noting the lack of precision in properly identifying hymn material in the New Testament, E. Krentz gave a lengthy description of Greco-Roman hymns and their compositional elements as a way of precisely identifying hymns, and then listed a number of NT hymns.¹⁴ Disappointingly, Krentz—whose article has been helpful in categorizing the hymns—included no material from Revelation. “Analysis of liturgical language is not an exact science,” L. Thompson reminds us,¹⁵ and scholars are still not agreed on exactly how many hymns are to be identified in the Apocalypse.¹⁶

¹³ O’Rourke, “The Hymns of the Apocalypse,” 400, with descriptions of each category.

¹⁴ E. Krentz, “Epideiktik and Hymnody: The New Testament and Its World,” *Biblical Research* 40 (1995): 50-97.

¹⁵ L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: University Press, 1990), 53.

¹⁶ Carnegie, “Worthy is the Lamb,” 243, n. 1, lists thirteen (1:5b f.; 4:9-11; 5:9b f.; 5:11-14; 7:9-12; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; 13:4; 14:1f.; 15:3f.; 16:5-7; 18:20; 19:1-8); this is the same list given in Morton, “Glory to God,” 91, n. 7. Gloer, “Worship God!”, 40, lists fifteen (the *Treishagion* 4:8; three songs of acclamation to the Lamb, 4:11, 5:9-10, 5:12; three doxologies, 5:13, 7:12, 16:5-7; seven “victory” songs, 7:10, 11:15, 11:17-18, 12:10-12, 15:3-4, 19:1-2, 19:6-8; an exhortation to praise God, 19:5). Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 315, notes sixteen: 4:8c, 4:11, 5:9b-10, 5:12b, 5:13b, 7:10b, 7:12, 11:15b, 11:17-18, 12:10b-12, 15:3b-4, 16:5b-7b, 19:1b-2, 19:3, 19:5b, 19:6b-8. Horn, “Hallelujah,”⁴³, gives a more general list of “worship scenes:” 4:8-11, 5:8-14, 6:10, 7:9-12, 11:15-18, 12:10-12, 15:2-4, 19:1-8.

The linguistic evidence suggests that, in scenes describing heavenly worship, the hymns and worship material are always prefaced with a present participial form of λέγω (i.e., “saying”).¹⁷ M. Krause notes (in a focused discussion of the hymns in Revelation 4, 5, and 7) that the term λέγοντες introduces each of the seven hymns in those chapters, and has the sense, not of “saying,” but of “relating accurately.”¹⁸ In this sense John sees and hears the worship taking place in heaven around the throne and relates to us accurately what he heard. In some of the songs the participial form of λέγω is followed by a causal ὅτι (“because” or “for”), indicating the reason why the worshippers are giving praise. These stylistic markers—scenes of heavenly worshippers, the accurate rendering of what they were singing (a participial form of λέγω), and the reasons for doing so (indicated by a ὅτι clause)—intertwine to reveal fourteen hymns in the Apocalypse: 4:8, 4:11, 5:9-10, 5:12-13, 7:10, 7:12, 11:15, 11:17-18, 12:10-12, 15:3-4, 16:5-7, 19:1-3, 19:5, 19:6-8.¹⁹

THE THEOLOGY OF THE HYMNS

We now turn to a brief sketch of the theology the hymns. While there are other themes latent in the Apocalypse that will come to the fore, the present discussion is limited to the corporate hymns of Revelation, with a view toward how they affect the worship of the church. “John paints the worship of God ... as an ideal, that is, it is worship the way God really wants it to be.”²⁰ If so,

¹⁷ The participles are normally plural (4:8, 4:11, 5:9, 5:12-13, 7:10, 7:12, 11:15, 11:17-18, 15:3-4, 19:1, 19:6), though on a few occasions, where a “voice” is heard from the throne, or an angel is speaking the participle is singular (12:10, 16:5, 16:7, 19:5). The participle is always present tense.

¹⁸ M. Krause, “The Seven Hymns of Revelation 4, 5, and 7, *Leaven* 17 (2009): Article 6. Also helpful is Krause’s note on the way English translations of Revelation render the introductory formula λέγοντες (“saying”).

¹⁹ This is also the list given in Smith, “Worthy is the Lamb,” 501. Though it is preceded by a participial form of λέγω, I have intentionally omitted the “Amen, Hallelujah!” of 19:4 spoken by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures. This two-word interjection seems to function as a response to the acclamation of the hymn in 19:1-3.

²⁰ Stuckenbruck, “Revelation 4-5,” 243.

then the theology of Revelation's hymnody deserves serious consideration and reflection as it shapes the practice of worship.

Four characteristics of worship emerge from the hymns in Revelation. The worship of heaven is ...

1. Directed Toward the Throne

All praise in the hymns of Revelation is directed squarely at the throne of God. The four living creatures surrounding the throne continually “give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne”, and repeat, “Holy, holy, holy” without ceasing (4:8-9). The twenty-four elders sing their song, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” as they lay down their golden crowns before the throne (4:10-11). Of course, they do not worship the throne itself, but rather the one seated on the throne, the “Lord God Almighty” (4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 19:6), “our Lord and God” (4:11, cf. 7:12, 19:1, 19:5) “who sits on the throne” (7:10).

All of this points theologically to God's *sovereignty*. He is the great King, not just over his people, but over all creation—every kingdom, every created thing, and every ruler. On five occasions (4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 19:6; cf. 16:14, 19:15, 21:22) God is referred to as the παντοκράτωρ, “the Almighty.” He reigns (11:17, 19:6). As lesser kings and dignitaries fell prostrate before the emperor and laid their crowns before him,²¹ so the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders²² fall prostrate before the throne of God, the King of all kings and Lord of all lords (4:10, 4:24, 7:11, 11:16, 19:4).

²¹ For more on this see Aune, “Influence,” 5-26; and below.

²² The identification of the elders is problematic. R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* NICNT (Eerdmans, 1977), 121-122, and G. Osborne, *Revelation* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker, 2002), 228-229, see them as an exalted order of angelic beings. Gloer, “Worship God!” 41-42, and Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, 58 see them as kings laying down their crowns before the throne, reflective of the practice of the Roman emperors. Aune, “Influence,” 9-10, sees them as nothing in particular, only props in the worship scene of Revelation. I am in agreement with G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1999), 322, and C.

As John describes the décor of the throne room (a sea of glass, four living creatures, each covered with six wings), he seems to be reworking visions of God's throne from Israel's scriptures.²³ Yahweh, the God of Israel, is his referent. But John also envisions the Lamb at the center of that throne as Yahweh's co-regent. As such, we find the worshippers in the heavenly scenes directing their praise toward the Lamb as they do God. Once the slaughtered Lamb comes into focus, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders begin to hymn the Lamb (5:9-10), standing in the center of the throne with God. The angels praise the Lamb with language nearly identical to that which they directed at God in 4:11: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (5:12). The scene in Rev. 5 concludes with a resounding chorus simultaneously praising God and the Lamb together (5:13). The referent varies throughout the hymns: sometimes God is praised directly (4:11, 11:17, 15:3, 16:5), as is the Lamb (5:9); at other times God is praised in the third person (4:8, 7:12, 19:1, 19:5-6), as is the Lamb (11:15, 19:7). God is described as the eternal one, the one "who lives forever and ever" (4:9, 4:11, 7:12), "the one who was, and is, and is to come" (4:8, 11:17; cf. 16:5), and so is the Lamb (5:13, 11:15). The Lamb at the center of the throne is worshipped simultaneously—but not in place of—the One seated on the throne. All of this is commensurate with the vision of Daniel 7, in which the "one like a son of man" is ushered into the center of the throne room of Yahweh, surrounded by myriads of attendants, and "given authority, glory and sovereign power" and the worship of people of every nation, and an eternal kingdom (Dan. 7:10, 13-14; cf. Rev. 1:12-15).

Davis, *Revelation*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press, 2000), 164, that they are representative of the twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles.

²³ Particularly Isaiah 6:1-4, Ezekiel 1:4-28, and Daniel 7:9-14.

The ceremonial worship of Revelation, which is directed squarely at the throne and the One(s) seated there, seems to be at odds with ancient cultic hymns. Ralph Martin notes that the scope of ancient hymns and prayers

is largely self-centered and the devotee's range of interest does not step outside the circle of egocentricity ... New Testament examples of hymnic prayer are quite different as they focus on "objective" realities which are at the same time intimately related to the believer's experience in the Christian community: the coming of God's kingdom, the progress of the gospel in the world, and the upbuilding of the church.²⁴

The hymns of Revelation are not personalized, individualistic, or egocentric. In line with other NT hymns, they focus on the reign of God and the gospel of Christ, and as such are always directed *toward* them.

Scholars of every stripe have also noticed that the hymns and worship of Revelation seem to parody that of the first-century imperial cult. The twenty-four elders surrender their golden crowns at the feet of God as the Parthian king Tiridates laid his crown at the feet of Nero.²⁵ They address the one seated on the throne, "our Lord and God," a title Domitian regularly applied to himself.²⁶ The cult of Augustus, which had a major presence in Asia Minor in the late first century, employed professional choirs to compose hymns and laud the exploits of Augustus and his imperial descendants.²⁷ John's description of those in white robes singing hymns around the throne may be a satire on these choirs. The parody of worship extends to God's opponents, who worship demons and idols (9:20), the dragon (13:4), and the sea beast (13:4, 8, 12). Honorific terms like "glory," "worthy," "honor," "power," "authority," and "salvation"—terms and

²⁴ Ralph P. Martin, "Some Reflections on New Testament Hymns," in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. H. H. Rowdon (InterVarsity, 1982), 43.

²⁵ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.29 denotes how Tiridates, in an attempt to "go to Rome, and bring the emperor a new glory" laid his crown before the statue of Nero.

²⁶ Suetonius, *Domitian*, 13.

²⁷ Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John* (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 25-121.

concepts directed toward the throne in Revelation—were staples in the worship of the imperial cult. But Carnegie cautions us that, while John may employ them as a polemic against the cult of Caesar, these terms are also biblical, and steeped as John was in Israel’s scriptures, “it is precarious to draw a straight line from the occurrence of similar [imperial] terminology ... to the Revelation hymns.”²⁸ There is no question that some of the hymns in Revelation are counter-imperial. They serve to remind John’s readers, who were under pressure to worship and give allegiance to the beast and the dragon, that their worship is to be directed toward the throne of God in heaven, and to the Lamb there with him—the Lamb slaughtered, yet victorious.

2. *Biblical*

When John began to compose songs that outline the salvation and deliverance of God, he naturally turned to the OT for themes, imagery, and language. The songs of Revelation are overtly Biblical. While the multitude sings “a new song” (5:9, 14:3), the new songs they sing are imbued with biblical (OT) themes, texts, allusions, references, and ideology. In this respect, the songs they sing are not new, but are rather new expressions of the same deliverance that God has wrought for his people once again, as he has done before. Space will not permit me to list, expound, or exegete the OT background of every hymn. A few examples will highlight John’s approach.

The first and most obvious is the *Treishagion* (“Holy, holy, holy”) of Rev. 4:8. As John attempts to portray the heavenly courtroom, he draws together images from Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6. The description of the four living creatures of Ezekiel are interwoven with the six-winged

²⁸ Carnegie, “Worthy is the Lamb,” 256. Smith, “Worthy is the Lamb,” 502, suggests that the ἄξιος (“worthy”) passages of Revelation are not derived from Judaism or the OT, and are probably derived from pagan models. Carnegie, 255, disagrees, and says there is not a single attested use of the term ἄξιος as an imperial cultic attribute before the third century. This seems to be a composition unique to John.

cherubim of Isaiah 6:1-3. The cherubim call out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). The four living creatures in Revelation sing an almost identical song: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” John’s creatures do not say, “the whole earth is full of his glory,” for in Revelation the “earth” is full of the Devil’s worshippers and miracles. But the use of the *Treishagion* is thoroughly biblical, and as John seeks to describe the marvelous vision of heaven and its worshippers, he naturally turns to his prophetic ancestors.

Neither is John’s description of God’s eternity—“who was and is and is to come”—new, but draws on themes again taken from the OT. The formula in Rev. 4:8 (ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος) bears some resemblance to the LXX version of God’s formal introduction to Moses: “I AM the I AM” (Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν; Exod. 3:14). The LXX version reflects the ambiguity of the Hebrew original and hints at eternity, translating to something like “I am the being one” or “I am the one who is,” and suggests a note of existence and eternity that the pagan rulers and gods lack.²⁹

Even the “new song” sung by the multitudes (5:9, 14:3) seems to reflect material of the ancient songs as John re-contextualizes themes from Israel’s hymnody and Scriptures for his readers. A good example of this “new couched in old” methodology is “The Song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb” (15:3). The Song of Moses tells the story of God’s deliverance of his people from the oppressive hands of their pagan persecutor, Pharaoh (Exod. 15:1-18). John finds these themes fitting for his readers’ *sitz im leben* and retells this story with the promise that God will once again deliver his people from their pagan persecutor—this time,

²⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Exodus*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 321: “I am truly he who exists.”

the beast (Rev. 15:2). The song brings in language from Jer. 10:7 (“Who will not fear you?”) and Isa. 66:23 (“All nations will come and bow down before you”) as a way of drawing attention to God’s mighty acts, formerly worked for his people Israel, now again wrought for those in Christ.

While John never *quotes* the OT, allusions and imagery borrowed from Israel’s scriptures are always faithful to their original meaning and direction. In his attempts to communicate through scripture, John never loses the sense of what the text was driving at. For example, in the hymn of Rev. 11:17-18, the chorus praises the eternal God “because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.” The reign of God is set in the context of his wrath over the raging nations: “The nations were angry, and your wrath has come.” The song’s allusion to Psalm 2 (“Why do the nations rage? ... His wrath is ready”; v. 1, 12) is not lifted out of context, but naturally derives from the overarching themes of the Psalm, including David’s legitimate reign amidst persecution (Ps. 2:1-3), and the wrath coming to those nations for their opposition to Yahweh and his anointed one (2:4-5, 12). These themes are not foreign to the text of Psalm 2, and John has not employed them outside the sphere of their intended force. Rather, he has contextualized them in such a way as to suggest that David’s story—of persecution by the nations, of God’s deliverance, and the judgment of the wicked—is also the story of John’s readers.³⁰

There is more to say about the use of the OT in the hymns of Revelation,³¹ much more than can be articulated here. What must be noted for our discussion of the theology of these hymns is that John, while bringing in elements and ideas of his own, continually does so in connection

³⁰ For more on this kind of contextualization see L. Hardin, “Searching for a Transformative Hermeneutic,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 5, no. 1 (2012): 144-157, esp. 153-156.

³¹ Carenegie, “Worthy is the Lamb,” sees a recasting of Isaiah 40-55 in the hymns of Revelation, but curiously quotes no texts from Isaiah 40-55 and makes no comparisons to the hymns of Revelation. R. Lowery, *Revelation’s Rhapsody* (Joplin: College Press, 2006), 175-197, has a magnificent appendix tracing the OT allusions and images that appear in Revelation.

with themes and ideas from the OT and contextualizes those themes to encourage his readers to remain faithful.

3. *Kerygmatic*

Thematically speaking, the songs of the Apocalypse are *kerygmatic*,³² that is, they tell the story of Yahweh and his Messiah. The worshippers in Revelation do not praise God arbitrarily, but articulate, enumerate, and explain the reasons for which God and the Lamb are to be praised. Specifically the hymns praise God for who he is and what he has done. In some cases the recollection of his acts and attributes leads the worshippers to anticipate what he will do next (11:18, 12:12, 15:4, 19:7-8).

The hymns begin by focusing on God's *attributes*. "Glory" is ascribed to God more than any other acclamation (4:9, 4:11, 5:12-13, 7:12, 11:17, 15:4, 19:1, 19:7) in the hymns, and is often set alongside other attributes like "holy" (ἅγιος 4:8), "ceremonial purity" (ὅσιος, often translated "holy"; 15:4, 16:5), "worthy" (4:11, 5:5, 5:9, 5:12), "power" and "strength" (4:11, 5:12-13, 7:12, 11:17, 19:1), "honor" (4:11, 5:12-13, 7:12), and "righteousness" (15:3, 16:5, 16:7, 19:2). Attributes are sometimes combined in combinations of seven (5:12, 7:12) or four (5:13), or three (4:11). As noted above, these attributes are directed toward the throne, where the Lamb is seated at the right hand of God, and not solely at God alone.

The *acts* of God, in some cases, are delineated as the reasons why these acclamations are directed toward the throne. In eight of the hymns, a causal ὅτι ("for, because") appears, outlining

³² I use the term "*kerygmatic*" in its most basic sense, "conveying a message," and not in the sense that C. H. Dodd used the term to describe the preaching of the early church. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 7-35, lists several characteristic elements of the early church's preaching: 1) a new Age has come with the advent of Christ, 2) who was descended from David, 3) and died according to Scripture, 4) was buried, 5) rose on the third day, 6) is exalted to the right hand of God, 7) and will come again (p. 17). These elements can be found throughout the book of Revelation, but do not always form the thematic content of the hymns.

the reasons why the worshippers sing. In Rev. 4:11 God is praised for his acts of creation: “*because* you created all things, and by your will they were and were created.” The Lamb is praised for his work of redemption: “You are worthy ... *because* you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God” (5:9). The hymns also praise God for his “judgment”—which in Revelation brings the connotation of wrath and destruction. In Rev. 11:17-18 the worshippers give thanks “*because* you have taken your great power and begun to reign.” This divine hegemony specifically comes as a result, in the hymn, of God’s wrath over the raging nations. The hymn then anticipates that the time has come for “judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants.” As Creator, he “destroys those who have destroyed (or corrupted³³) the earth.” This judgment is not limited to the human enemies of Christ, but is wrought upon the Devil, and the worshippers praise God “*because* the accuser of our brothers ... has been hurled down” (12:10). The hymns in Rev. 15:3-4 and 16:5-7 note again God’s holiness and righteousness as causal factors for these judgments, as he avenges the blood of his people and causes the smoke of charred Babylon to rise into the heavens as long as he lives (i.e., “forever and ever,” 19:2). The final hymn circles back around to the salvation of God for judging in this manner and delivering his people from their enemies: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory, *because* the wedding of the Lamb has come” (19:7).

To call the hymns *kerygmatic* is to say that they convey a message, and for the Seer, that message is “the eternal gospel” which the angel “gospels” to the whole earth (14:6). Twice the Lamb is described as “slaughtered” (5:9, 5:12) and his blood brings victory to his people (12:11). On the surface, however, the hymns seem to lack any emphasis on the resurrection. Beale notes

³³ R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 52. Bauckham sees a connection to Gen. 6:11-13, 17 where God saved his people (via Noah) and judged those who “corrupted” the earth.

that the hymns “make no explicit mention of the resurrection is astounding and underscores the ironic nature of Christ’s victorious death.”³⁴ But a quick review of John’s portrait of Christ—in and out of the hymns—shows that he expects his readers to know implicitly that Christ *has already* been risen. Knowing later he will describe him as the “Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world” (13:8), John introduces Jesus as the one who gave him the revelation (1:1-2), who currently walks among the lampstands (1:12-20), the one “who died and yet lives” (2:8). The slaughtered Lamb now stands at the center of the throne (5:6), and on Mt. Zion (14:1), harvests the earth (14:14-16), wages war on behalf of his people (19:11-16, 19-21), and gives presence and light to the city of God (21:23). The hymns are not void of implicit understanding of the resurrection of Jesus, for though the Lamb “was slain,” he still stands ready to receive the worship of “purchased men for God” (5:9, 5:12-13). The Lamb now lives to prepare a wedding for his bride, which all who are righteous will have the privilege of attending (19:7-8).

The hymns each have a story to tell. It is the story of God and the Lamb, of their mighty attributes and acts, of their deliverance of God’s people and judgment of their enemies. It is the story that John’s bible told of God’s people, which connects us to the biblical aspect of the hymns—the story of God’s people retold, contextualized for John’s readers. In that sense the hymns are *kerygmatic*, delivering a message of hope, deliverance, and vindication.

4. *Inclusive*

Finally, the hymns of the Apocalypse reveal that the worship of heaven is inclusive. One of the striking things that emerges from an analysis of the hymns is the availability of and the call to all people to participate. The opening scene in Revelation begins with Jesus standing among his

³⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 359.

churches (1:12-20). Once he addresses them, John is ushered closer to the throne, and is overwhelmed with its majesty. His description of the throne starts with the center and works its way outward. Immediately surrounding the throne are the four living creatures singing their song (4:6b-8), surrounded by the harping of the twenty-four elders (4:4, 9-11), who are thus encircled by the myriads of angels (5:11-12). The elders particularly praise the Lamb for purchasing persons “from every tribe and tongue and nation and people” (5:9). That multitude begins to sing, and includes “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them” (5:13). The worshippers in heaven are inclusive of all humanity.

The heavenly choir in Revelation is comprised of multitudes. They are the “144,000, from *all* the tribes of Israel” (7:4) and comprise “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language” (7:9). The source of the voices in Rev. 11:15 is not identified, but is numerous and loud. Those singing the Songs of Moses and the Lamb are “those who had been victorious over the beast,” irrespective of nationality or gender (15:2). The final hymn is sung by “what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting” (19:1, 6).

Not only is the worship of heaven *performed* by an all-inclusive group, its content *calls* for worshippers without exclusion to participate in the heavenly worship. Rev. 11:18 notes that the time has come for rewarding the saints, who are comprised of “those who reverence your name, both small and great.” John anticipates the time when “all nations will come and worship” before the throne (15:4). A voice from heaven beckons praise from “all you his servants, you who hear him, both small and great” (19:5)

While there is serious conflict between heaven and earth in the Apocalypse, that conflict is not between peoples of various nationalities and races, but rather between those who worship God and those who worship the name and icon of the beast (14:9, 11). The beast has his own

worshippers (13:4, 8, 12), who are comprised (in satirical fashion) of “every tribe, people, language and nation” (13:7), “all the inhabitants of the earth” (13:8), “everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave” (13:16). They worship the beast and sing to him: “Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him? (13:4). Bowls of judgment are poured out upon the kingdom of the beast, and rather than repent, the inhabitants of the earth curse the name of God (16:9, 11, 21). The numerous calls to repentance in Revelation serve as a call for humanity to repent of its idolatry (the worship of the “icon” of the beast, 14:7, 9-11) and to “Praise our God” (19:5).

The worship of heaven is inclusive, offering all who desire so an opportunity to participate. The Jew-Gentile controversy that inevitably surfaced in the early church is not an issue for John. His main boundary marker seems to be that between those of faith and those who aren't. Thus, he can call those non-believing Jews of Asia Minor “those who say they are Jews but are not” (2:9; 3:9), and can count believing Gentiles among those whose place is in the inner court of the Temple (11:1) while non-believers are relegated to the court of the Gentiles (or “outsiders”; 11:2). Like Paul, who would not tolerate some (particularly the poor) being left out of the worship around the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:17-22),³⁵ so John will not permit the worship of heaven to descend into a cheap earthly, class-driven, race-oriented, gender-exclusive imitation. The worship that John envisions (and the repentance that precedes it) is open and available to all. The worship of heaven is “a radical equalizer that breaks down all boundaries” and creates an egalitarian *communitas* of those gathered around the throne.³⁶

³⁵ For a concise explanation, see A. Thiselton, *The Living Paul: An Introduction to the Apostle's Life and Thought* (InterVarsity, 2009), 124-125.

³⁶ L. Thompson, *Revelation*, 69-71.

CONCLUSION

The hymns of Revelation reveal a vast and rich theology, drawn primarily from Israel's Scriptures, but at times reflecting in satirical fashion the practices, language, and obeisance of the imperial cult. The worshipping community on earth, reflecting practices that John sees as concurrently taking place in heaven, should give attention to the theology of its hymns. The hymns we find in the Apocalypse are directed squarely at the throne (and not at ourselves), biblical (not exclusively emotional) in their content, telling the story of the victory of God and the Lamb (not the prosperity and well-being of the worshippers) and inclusive of all who desire to attend the throne (lacking overtones of apocalyptic-style polemic).

The songs we sing are important, for they teach us (as Campbell noted) just as much as the Scriptures do. This essay is provided as a way of clearly outlining the very basic (but complex and rich) theology of the hymns in the hope that it will be helpful to the worshipping community and its practitioners (worship leaders, song-writers, and liturgical theologians). The best worship songs, in whatever style and genre, direct their praise toward the throne of God, tell the story of God's deliverance through Christ, do so in themes and language drawn from scripture, and call for any and all who desire to join the heavenly chorus and participate in the worship of the one true God and the Lamb.