

Revelation 21-22

Background Planning Reflections Prepared in Advance of Assembly 2011

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Context of texts

The Book of Revelation was written to instruct and strengthen early Christians who were being compelled by imperial Rome to compromise their commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Rather than a detailed scenario of future history, ready to be set in motion by a future event (e.g. the rapture), as popular prophecy makes it out to be, Revelation first addressed Christians in the mid-90s who were facing pressure to observe a law requiring all citizens to confess the Roman Emperor Domitian as “Lord and God,” and to accommodate themselves to the wealth and power of Rome. Revelation continues to speak today to believers anywhere who must make a costly choice between loyalty to Christ or allegiance to the state and the idolatrous culture it represents.

Revelation locates the church’s struggle to maintain its faithfulness to Christ in the arena of the great cosmic battle between God and Satan. On one side are God, God’s people, and Jesus, the Lamb that was slain (ch. 5). Opposing them is the “evil trinity” of the Dragon (Satan), the Sea Beast (the empire), and the Earth Beast (the priests and propaganda machine of the empire -- ch. 13). The decisive battle between these two powers was fought and won at the cross and resurrection, when the Dragon received a death blow by the crucified but victorious Lamb (ch. 12). But the Dragon’s mortally wounded state now spells danger for the faithful church; in the “end times” of his dying wrath, he lashes out at those who represent his conqueror. And in Revelation, the satanic Dragon’s primary means of conquest is through both deceiving and coercing Jesus’ followers to worship—i.e. ascribe ultimate significance to—the idolatrous emperor, state, and their culture, and punishing or killing them should they refuse.

Revelation thus “reveals” the true nature of the struggle the faithful church faces in this world. It exhorts believers to maintain vigilance and resist the coercive pressures and seductive allures of its culture. It urges them to remain faithful to Jesus alone as the world’s only true Lord and Savior, even at the price of suffering. The book encourages its readers by reminding them that Jesus also was a “faithful witness” who overcame death, becoming “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5) and now holding the world’s destiny in his hand (ch. 5). It encourages the church by assuring its ultimate protection by God through the trials and tribulations of the present evil time (ch. 7). And—the theme of our texts—it encourages Christians to resist the seductions of their culture and stand firm for

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Christ by revealing to the “not yet” coming triumph of God’s reign that has “already” begun - a new heaven and earth, in which God’s faithful people will dwell joyfully and securely, in the full light of God’s unmediated presence.

Note on interpretation. Revelation uses a genre of writing called “apocalyptic,” meaning “to reveal” (the second half of Daniel is an Old Testament example). Apocalyptic literature uses dramatic visions and symbols to declare basic truths about God, the world, and God’s people that might not now be self-evident. Among the main themes of apocalyptic literature are the cosmic conflict between God and the powers of evil, the suffering of God’s people in the present time, and the victorious outcome of God’s purposes at the end of time. Apocalyptic symbols (e.g. Dragon, Beast, 666) usually referred to something not in the distant future but in the experience of the original readers. We must not interpret the symbols of Revelation as forecasting specific phenomena in our own day, such as Russia, credit cards, radical Islam, the United Nations, etc. Rather, we must first ask, “What would these vivid and puzzling symbols have meant for the first believers who first read this book?” Only then can we apply its message to our own time.

Commentary

What follows is not a systematic exegesis but some observations and thoughts about the chosen texts for MC Canada Assembly 2011 and their principal themes. Users are advised to consult commentaries and other resources (www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1313) for more technical and detailed insights and explanations.

Rev. 21:1-4

OT background. This text alludes to Isaiah 65:17-19, and 66:22. Centuries earlier, the prophet also foresaw a new heaven and new earth, with Jerusalem at its center. For Isaiah, this was cause for joy for God’s people, as their former sufferings will be no more. These sufferings have included premature death for infants and elderly, and loss of homes, land and livelihood to others, suggesting poverty, economic injustice, oppression, and persecution. There is also the promise of universal peace. All will dwell safely and securely, without fear. The author of Revelation would have expected these same promises to be realized in his own vision of God’s future final act of creation.

Earth as well as heaven. Note carefully—John’s vision of the end of history is not an escape from matter, time and space, a transport to an ethereal, otherworldly realm. Contrary to popular prophecy, Revelation does not teach that the present world is doomed

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to destruction while the chosen few are snatched up to heaven. Rather, the end encompasses *earth* as well as heaven. The original “very good” world God made (Gen. 1:31), now flawed by sin, will not be set aside or consigned to the ash heap. Instead, God will renew, transform, and restore the original creation. “See, I am making all things new,” the voice from the throne declares (21:5), not, “I am making all new things.” Indeed, one could say that, when God’s purposes are complete, heaven and earth, now seen as opposites, will be joined as one. It will be the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Notably, there is **no sea** in the new heaven and earth. This is not a forecast of ecological disaster (though God may allow it as a consequence of human sinfulness toward creation). In Revelation, the sea is the reservoir of evil, out of which the beast arises (13:1). In the renewed creation, the forces of chaos and evil will be excluded.

It is important to remember that this future transformation of creation already has begun - in Abraham, running through the prophets, Jesus and the church. This original salvation story always envisaged not just the saving of individual souls, but the formation of a redeemed community (Israel, the church), and ultimately the salvation of the whole created order (Rom. 8:20-21). (See also Ephesians 1:8-10.) What our texts foresee is the climax of this long drama of salvation in which the church today finds itself.

A city at the center. At the center of the new heaven/earth is a city, a new Jerusalem. This fulfills the earlier prophetic promise of a restored Jerusalem (Is. 65:18-19). Also, in Revelation’s imagery, Jerusalem is the good, godly city counterpart to the corrupt, harlot city Babylon (Rome, for the first readers) that has persecuted the faithful church (17:6). Unlike Babylon, the coming city in which God’s faithful people shall dwell is in intimate, faithful relationship with the true Lord—like a *bride*.

It is worth reflecting on the significance of a city as being at the heart of God’s new world. What makes a city? A city is a place of vitality, noise, bustle, creativity, a feast of stimulation for the eye and ear, mind and heart. Cities are centers of culture—music, art, commerce, industry, food, fashion, learning, etc. Cities are also cosmopolitan in their population—a mosaic of ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. Of course, cities are also places of poverty, blight, immorality, and decadence. But these defects will be absent from the new Jerusalem. The fact that a *city* stands at the heart of God’s new world suggests that the best of human enterprise, creativity, culture, and diversity will flourish there. Life will be busy, challenging, energetic, rewarding...and perhaps also mundane in its details, like life is today. (I once had a teacher who said, “When God’s Kingdom comes, someone will have to deliver the mail.”)

Going beyond the chosen texts, one can also see that the new Jerusalem is immense in its size and wealth (21:15-21). One commentator has written, “God’s city is meant to be a

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refuge for the entire world's believing immigrant population. In God's city, there are no slums, no squatter settlements, no favellas or barrios or bustees! There are no governmental policies to keep people out or any economic standards that exclude the marginalized from effective participation in the marketplace. God has built the city for the whole world!" (Robert Linthicum, *Partners in Urban Transformation* website.)

Come down from heaven. Note the descent of the new Jerusalem *from heaven to earth*. At the end of the present world history, we don't "go to be with God" in some otherworldly, spiritual realm. Rather, God "comes to be with us," as God already has done in the incarnation and sending of the Spirit. Moreover, the downward movement of the city suggests that it is a gift of God, a climaxing act of grace. Nevertheless, faithful Christians today can contribute raw material to its building. Revelation has earlier intimated that faithful deeds in Jesus' name today are not done in vain, but will endure after the believer's death (14:13). (Revelation does not directly address the question of what happens to believers who die before the new heaven and earth come. It does, however, show those who have died for Christ now "under the altar" (6:9), close to Christ. We can assume the same for believers today who die before the end. But these believers will be raised to life at the end (20:4ff) to populate God's new earth/heaven. For the idea of the resurrection of the body at the end of time, see 1 Cor. 15.)

God's presence. God will dwell fully present in this city. The announcement, "See, the home of God is among mortals...." has precedents in Jesus, the Word, who "became flesh and lived among us," (John 1:14), and in Jesus and the Father coming to dwell with the believer (John 14:23).

No tears, safety. Isaiah earlier had foreseen the Lord wiping away tears (Is. 25:8—notably, in the context of a feast for *all* people, not just Israel). Also, the writer of Revelation has already promised the faithful church release from suffering (7:17c). Here, the "tears" likely refer not first to the trials and pains of being human (e.g. sickness, loss, natural death), but to the sufferings inflicted on those who remain loyal to Jesus (death, mourning, crying, pain). The good news: those who suffer and die for their faithfulness to Christ, in this perilous "end times," will one day find release, healing and safety.

Rev. 21:22-27

No temple. No house of worship in the new Jerusalem. None is needed, since God is immediately present. One could say that the whole city is a church, that is, the place where God is adored and worshipped. God—not a financial tower, shopping mall, cathedral, war memorial—is at the center of this open-gated (safe and secure) city, suffusing all with his light and Spirit. The implication is that, by dwelling in the full presence of God, people will also live in peace, harmony, and security with each other.

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Nations and kings. It is noteworthy that the “nations” (*ethnos*, peoples) and “kings” appear in the new Jerusalem, since in Revelation they tend to be allied with the satanic powers against the church (11:8-10, 14:8; 17:1-6; 18:3). But at the end, they too are transformed, bringing their glory into the heart of God’s renewed creation. The new Jerusalem will also have “powers and principalities,” like kings and nations, but they will be restored to their subordinate, obedient place under the reigning Lamb. There will be no “clash of civilizations.” Political, economic, and social structures will work like they were meant to work under God, organizing the world in a way that makes for freedom, wholeness, and life rather than for coercion, brokenness and death. Again we are told that human culture will flourish, as the nations bring their best to the new Jerusalem.

Rev. 22:1-7

Tree for healing. The imagery alludes to Eden (Gen. 1-2) and Ezekiel’s vision (47:7-12). The tree of life (now two trees) is now not off limits to humanity but is accessible. The healing river flows outward, and is for the healing and blessing of the nations (peoples), just as Israel was intended to be (Gen. 12:3). Even in God’s new world, citizens apparently will have the task of going out in new ways to extend God’s grace and love. The human family will be healed of whatever causes enmity and division, such as nationalistic pride, ethnic tribalism, and violence. Diversity of language and culture becomes a blessing, not a curse, the marvel of a phenomenally creative God, to be celebrated and enjoyed.

In short, the new heaven and earth is creation as God intends it to be. It will be a transformed social-economic-political-religious order, freed from sin and death, where all people will be in right relationship with God and in “shalom” (peace) with each other and creation. *This is the ultimate Christian hope.* And this hope has already taken shape in Jesus’ death, resurrection, and Spirit working in the church and world.

So what?

How do we live now, given the direction and end toward which human history is moving under God? Revelation (and the larger New Testament) does not allow believers to passively sit back and relax because “it will all come out right in the end.” Rather, they are called to *actively* share “the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance” (1:9) in the present. (See also 1 Cor. 15:58). Just as the coming of Christmas stimulates action—decorating, gift buying, etc.—reflecting the future day, just as the appearance of the crocus flower even in the dead of winter heralds the coming of spring, so God’s people are called to be and to work for signs, foretastes, specimens of the future that is coming.

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1. How does the future new heaven and earth influence now our witness for justice and peace, our work with broken families, our care for creation (e.g. issues like global warming), our farming and land use, our _____?

2. The new Jerusalem will be a *multicultural* city, where human differences of language and culture will no longer divide but will be sources of joyful enrichment. A foretaste of that coming world today is a multicultural church, in which people from a multitude of “tribes and peoples and languages” worship (7:9-10).

a. How can MC Canada’s majority ethnic Anglo-German-Mennonite congregations and minority ethnic/multi-cultural congregations utilize each other’s gifts for worship and service? How can relatively homogeneous congregations make connections with other congregations unlike themselves for worship, fellowship, service, and learning?

b. How can our congregations be more welcoming to persons of other cultures, e.g. immigrants, since the world that is coming will be diverse, inclusive, and welcoming?

3. What are the seductive, idolatrous powers and principalities that seduce and pressure us away from faithfulness to Jesus? How can we resist them in the spirit of the risen Christ?

4. While our texts focus on a city, they also draw on rural imagery (trees, river). How do rural and natural environments contribute to one’s faithfulness to Jesus? How might they become “thin places” where God breaks through for healing and growth?

5. The book of Revelation is about hope, not fear. How can our congregations become even more places of hope? In worship? In care and nurture? In mission?

6. The coming city and world of God will be a place of beauty. How can the church encourage and celebrate the contributions of its artists, musicians, and writers?