

Flash-Mob Messiah

The book of Revelation is full of surprises.

A pastor named John was the author of this book. As a leader of the first-century church, he had special concern for “the seven churches that are in Asia,” and at the time that he wrote, he was living in exile “on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Chances are, he was sent there by the Romans because he insisted on saying that his Lord was Jesus, rather than the Roman emperor.

So there he is, minding his own business on the Lord’s day, when suddenly he is summoned to “come up” to heaven.

In his Sunday worship, he’s transported to heaven.

A big surprise! One that most of us would welcome, especially in the middle of a routine worship service.

So what does he see there?

Sitting on a throne is Almighty God, looking like the gemstones jasper and carnelian. God is enclosed by an emerald-like rainbow, and his throne is surrounded by four living creatures with many watchful eyes. The four creatures are surrounded by 24 white-clothed elders and their thrones.

Picture the scene: The throne of God is at the center of two concentric circles of worshipers. In the inner circle are four magnificent creatures with eyes and wings, resembling a lion, an ox, a human being and an eagle. These four powerful creatures, often associated with the gospel-writers Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John. In the outer circle are 24 elders representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 disciples of Jesus -- people from the Old Testament and the New.

And what are they doing? Worshiping God together.

These members of the heavenly court throw themselves completely into worship. The four creatures unceasingly sing “holy, holy, holy” to praise “the Lord God the Almighty.” In sync with them, the 24 elders fall down before the throne, saying in unison that God is worthy “to receive glory and honor and power” because God created all things.

What we have here, to express it in contemporary terms, is a flash mob of worshipers. John sees the Lord God Almighty, reigning over heaven and Earth, and a flash mob of beings worshiping.

In recent years, flash mobs have appeared in shopping malls, and surprised people by singing a composition such as the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s Messiah. These eruptions of song appear to be spontaneous -- they are surprising and inspiring, bringing worship into the middle of

typically secular spaces.

Staging a flash mob involves a group of singers arising out of a crowd and singing a song that is well-known to them, but that appears to be unrehearsed. The singers around the heavenly throne are so well-versed in those hymns that it takes but one voice to start things off before the whole chorus joins in.

“And he shall reign forever and ever.” “King of kings and Lord of lords.” Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

These verses from the book of Revelation have been turned into the stirring music of the “Hallelujah Chorus.” We can imagine them being part of the music of the heavenly flash mob that is singing around the throne of God, forever and ever and ever.

So what does John’s vision of worship reveal about God?

Surprisingly, it tells us almost nothing about God’s appearance, except to say that God “looks like jasper and carnelian,” gems of beauty and permanence. Instead, John refers to God repeatedly as being on a throne: “one seated on the throne,” highlighting God’s power to reign over heaven and earth. As the king on a heavenly throne, God is in a position to receive our honor and worship.

John also refers to God’s eternity, calling God one “who is and who was and who is to come” and “who lives forever and ever.” He’s reminding us of God’s eternal nature, echoing the divine name that God revealed to Moses in the burning bush, “I AM WHO I AM.”

We know that human life is limited in time, but the eternal God exists before, during, and after time. John is setting up a very clear contrast with the Roman emperor, the most powerful human lord of the first century, with this reference to a throne or seat of power and the issue of longevity. If the emperor conquers nations with a fearsome army, God controls heaven and Earth with an army of angels. If the emperor terrifies people with violence and killing, God loves us and offers us joy and peace, in life and in death.

Revelation is telling us that God is in control. God is the one true Lord,

- over the human lords of Rome and Washington, D.C.
- over the titans of Wall Street.
- over the “Mad Men” of Madison Avenue.
- over the brightest stars of Hollywood as well.

John’s vision of heavenly worship also reveals much about Christ. In Revelation 5, Jesus is described as “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered,” in a place of honor next to the throne of God because he had been slain on the cross. “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered,” sing thousands of angels, creatures, and elders, “to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

“Lamb of God” is a surprising term, one that appears first in the gospel of John, when John the Baptist spots Jesus and says, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” As the Lamb of God, Jesus offers his blood on the cross as a sacrificial offering, one that brings forgiveness and new life to all who believe.

In Revelation, John says that he sees a Lamb, “standing as if it had been slaughtered,” and hears the creatures of the heavenly court sing, “you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.” The Latin term for Lamb of God is *Agnus Dei*, which has been used widely in Christian music.

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

Like Almighty God, Christ the slaughtered Lamb receives worship from the living creatures and the elders, songs of praise from the angels, and adoration from all creatures in heaven and on earth. The result is that every creature in heaven and on earth worships Christ along with God, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

As the Hallelujah chorus says so well: “And He shall reign forever and ever, Forever and ever, forever and ever.

John’s vision of the heavenly court gives us important clues about how to worship God. Like the 24 elders who represent the people of God, we are to fall before God with humility, and praise God with joyful thanks for the creation of “all things.” Like them, we are also to fall before Christ and praise him with a new song, in thanks for his redemption of the world.

We can also identify with the living creatures of heaven and earth who are exuberant in their praise of God and Christ. In every time and place, praise-filled worship is a proper offering to our God and to the Lamb, the ones who have created, redeemed, and renewed us.

This vision of heavenly worship sums up who God and Christ are, and what God and Christ are doing in the world. It prepares us to face the many struggles of life, including a variety of temptations and hardships, by inviting us to carve out time for worship in the course of our daily lives.

As we offer songs of praise, the Holy Spirit will open our eyes to the beauty of the world, the wonder of life and the mystery of love. As we bow in humility, we will become more confident in God’s care and control, and more trusting in Christ our Savior. As we make space for worship, we will discover that God and Christ are continuing the work of creation, redemption, and renewal. We will find that they are always worthy of our honor and blessing, and deserving of our praise:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! Forever and ever. Amen