

The Christology of the Book of Revelation

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I. Introduction

In the prologue of Revelation, John has recapitulated the key theological points in this book he is going to reveal. Among them, Christology becomes one of the most distinct:

“¹*The revelation of Jesus Christ*, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,⁵ and from *Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.* Amen.

(Revelation 1:1-8, NRSV)¹

The central position of Christ is seen in the opening words “the revelation of Jesus Christ” which serves as its title and implies the whole book Christocentric.² From the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quotations are from NRSV (New Revised Standard Version, 1989).

² Donald Guthrie, “The Christology of Revelation.” In *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: essays on the historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 398.

immediate interpretation in 1:1-3 of the title we know this is the revelation from Jesus Christ that pervades all understanding of the book. God is the ultimate source of revelation, however, Christ, the central mediator of this revelation, transmits it to believers.

The threefold respective description of the person and the work of Christ in 1:5-6 has made a best summary proclamation of the Christology of Revelation. It also outlines the Christological material within the book.

From the angle of the “person” of Christ, 1:5a presents him as the faithful witness,³ the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth, pointing to three significant elements of the glorified Christ in Revelation. From the angle of the “work” of Christ, focusing on the relationship between him and all the believers, 1:5b-6a presents what he is doing and has done for God’s children: he loves them, released them from their sins by his blood, and he has made them to be a kingdom and priests to his God and Father.

Christ is essentially described as the witness to the truth of God throughout the whole book of Revelation (1:5; 3:14; 19:11; 21:5). It refers to the purpose of his life as the one who bore witness to the truth from God with special emphasis on his death that followed as a result.⁴ He is also seen as the risen Christ (1:5; 1:18*2; 5:6, 9, 12; cf. 22:1) and as the King of kings (1:5; 11:15; 17:14; 19:16). The risen Christ is declared sovereign over the church (Col 1:18) and the earth (Ps 89:25). Just as David says: “I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” (Psalm 89:27) Jesus has achieved the

³ According to NA27, the Greek ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός (lit. the witness, the faithful one. Cf. Brighton) shows two nominatives in apposition to Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. But it is usually translated as “the faithful witness” in most English versions (Ex.: NIV, NRSV, NKJV, NASB). Cf. Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation*, Concordia Seminary (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 33, 35.

⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 70.

highest glory through faithful obedience that led to death. Vindicated by his resurrection from dead, he is to be universally confessed as the uppermost Lord (Cf. Php 2:10-11).

Moreover, Christ is portrayed as the one who loves God's people that shows his motive. And he freed them from their sins by his blood so that they can now worship God as his royal priests demonstrates his saving work. The voluntary, sacrificial nature of the death of Christ and the salvific benefits of that death are central fundamental of God's people's adoration of Christ in Revelation.⁵ However, Christ's person and work could not be separated from Trinitarian imprimatur and be valued without the Trinitarian connection. "This worship is directed through Christ to the Father and is inspired by the Spirit."⁶

These unparalleled characteristics belong to Jesus Christ are presented consistently and interlinked with each other. Every other title of Christ or role Jesus Christ carries out in the Apocalypse is connected closely with the elements mentioned above. Generally speaking, the Apocalypse presents Jesus Christ as either the Son of Man (dominant in chapters 1-3) or the Lamb of God (dominant in chapters 4-22), and sometimes as the mighty angel of Yahweh who acts on Christ's behalf and stands in the place of Christ as angels' overlord. (10: 1-3; 18:1, 21; 19:17).

When he appears as the Son of Man, it is trembling and fearful to look upon him. For he always plays the role as the judge of the churches (1:12-3:22) and the human being (14:14-16; 19:11-16) on behalf of the Father (cf. Jn 5:22-23, 27). When he appears as the Lamb, he is like the deliverer or shepherd of God's people. Especially due to his unique quality "ὥς ἐσφαγμένον" (as if it had been slain, 5:6, 12), there is no fear or tears but love, thanksgiving and assurance when God's people stand before him or worship him (ch. 5;

⁵ David Aune, *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary 52A (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1997), 46.

⁶ Brighton, *Revelation*, 42.

7:14-17).⁷ However, the features cannot be divided clearly, for John also describes the love and assurance of the Son of Man (3:9, 20-21) and the wrath of Lamb (6:16-17).

II. The Son of man

It is noteworthy that the title “Jesus Christ” occurs three times in the first chapter (1:1, 2, 5) but nowhere in Revelation. The messianic title for Christ is introduced at the beginning but occurs again only four times in the other passages (11:15; 12:10; 20:4; 20:6). It is as if John is leading his readers to concentrate on an even more significant title, that of the Lamb, which dominates chapters 4-22.⁸ This train of thought corresponds to the arrangement of chapters 1-3 which is preparatory in character and calls for churches’ repentance.

The portrait of Jesus Christ in the opening chapter is totally different to that in the Gospels. Rather than being one hungering (Lk 4:2), thirsting (Jn 19:28) and working hard even to death (Mk 10:45), the exalted Christ in 1:12-16 is incomparably glorious and overawing. The dazzling vision of the one “like a son of man” in the midst of the lampstands precludes the ending of God’s eternal salvation plan. The glorified Christ is the key actor on the stage of the drama of salvational history that is directed by God the Father himself.

Actually it is the resurrection makes the difference. “The prophetic promise, seen prophetically by Daniel (Dan 7) and momentarily experienced by John (Mt 17:1-2) at the transfiguration shortly before the promise’s fulfillment, stands now consummated in all its everlasting beauty.”⁹

The symbolic detailed description is aimed to enhance this impressive view of Christ in

⁷ Brighton, *Revelation*, 53.

⁸ Guthrie, “The Christology of Revelation.” 398-9.

⁹ Brighton, *Revelation*, 49.

glory. The majestic robe, the golden belt, the pure white head and hair, the flaming eyes, the burning feet, the mighty voice, the powerful right hand, the sharp two-edged sword, and the shining face at once set this figure apart from ordinary mortals. In reverential awe John's response to the supernatural vision is to fall at the feet of Christ as though dead (cf. Jos 5:14; Eze I:28; Dan 8:17; Mt 17:6; Ac 26:14). However, Christ lays his right hand and speaks a word of strong assurance. This action communicates power and blessing. In the same time it restores John's confidence and prepares him to hear the words of consolation and command.

A. The first and the last

Obviously, John's begins his vision with a Christophany.¹⁰ He sees the exalted Christ in all his glory. The risen Christ declares his identity: "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades." (1:17b-18) Similar self-declaration by risen Christ and God in the Apocalypse can be found as follows:

God: I am the Alpha and the Omega. (1:8)

Christ: I am the first and the last. (1:17)

God: I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. (21:6)

Christ: I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.
(22:13)

After close studying we can find the Apocalypse identifies Jesus Christ with God. The two titles, "the Alpha and the Omega", "the beginning and the end", are supposed to designate God as eternal in relation to the world. He precedes and originates all things, as

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 54.

their Creator, and will bring all things to their eschatological fulfillment.¹¹ Due to Jesus' death and rising again to rescue God's people in order to bring them back to life, he becomes their redeemer, the exalted Lord Christ declares that he is the first and the last of God's people (this title is only to Christ in this book, 2:8, cf. Isa 48:12, 20).¹² The eternalness of Christ is closely related to his church. That's why the victorious Living One now has the keys of death and the grave (1:18). Important as the resurrection is for Christ's participation in God's sovereignty (2:27, 3:21), these titles applied to him indicate that he shares the eternal being of God from before creation and his divine equality with the heavenly Father.

B. Walk in the midst of seven golden lampstands

The risen Christ appears as a glorious and triumphant heavenly being. He holds seven stars—the angels of the seven churches in his right hand (Cf. 1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1), and walks among the seven golden lampstands—the seven churches (Cf. 1:12-13; 20, 2:1, 5). The two participles are notable in the first verse of the first letter to Ephesus: Christ holds (κρατῶν) the angels and walks (περιπατῶν) among the seven churches (2:1). The exalted Christ is speaking out that the angels are in his control, and he is present among the churches and aware of their activities.¹³ His presence implies detailed inspection in all churches, and resulting full knowledge (“οἶδα”: *I know*, 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15) of their overall manner of life.

Though his unseen presence, he is present with and in the midst of his churches through the Spirit, an emphatic fact reiterated at the close of each of the seven proclamations by the refrain “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is

¹¹ Ibid, 54-55.

¹² Brighton, *Revelation*, 651.

¹³ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 86.

saying to the churches.”(2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) In directing John to write seven letters, the exclusive activity of the glorified Christ seems to be his present act of speaking to churches. His only action is his words, his only sword the sword of his mouth (1:16; cf. 19:21).¹⁴ This identification reminds us of his appearance as “the Son of Man” (1:13), he is both the church’s Lord and judge. As the church’s Lord, the exalted Christ shares the same authority and glory with God. As the church’s judge, he calls the church to repentance (2:5, 16; 3:3, 19), because of his love and concern.¹⁵ Only a devout repentance can make them be well prepared for receiving the message after chapter 4 which is a call to provoke and to win the conflict by persevering in faithful witness (12:11; 14:12; 19:10; 20:4).

C. Reap the harvest

Two visions of judgments in 14:14-20 bring the interregnum (12:1-14:20) to its close. It is common to interpret 14:14–16 as portraying the gathering of the church and the wicked by Christ at his coming, and 14:18–20 as the gathering of the unbelieving world for judgment.¹⁶ After disclosing the terrifying conflict between God and dragon (ch.12), the beasts and the church (ch.13), the scene culminates in the great harvest, which is the judgment of God. When John looks, and there is a white cloud, and sitting upon the cloud is one “like the Son of Man” (14:14) who is none other than the risen Christ (1:13). The background is Dan 7:13-14 in which “One like a Son of Man” comes “with the clouds of heaven” to receive an everlasting dominion and an undestroyed kingdom. It signifies the Lord Christ will carry out the judgment in God’s power and righteousness.

¹⁴ M. Eugene Boring, “Narrative Christology in the Apocalypse,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 (1992): 707.

¹⁵ Brighton, *Revelation*, 67.

¹⁶ D.A. Carson, et al., “Revelation” in *The New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), CD—The Essential IVP Reference Collection.

The golden crown he wears symbolizes victory by his death and resurrection. The sharp sickle is the means of reaping the grain harvest. It pictures the exalted Christ is going to reap the harvest in “righteous retribution.”¹⁷ The command to “send your sickle” is an allusion to Joel 4:13, its context indicates Yahweh will sit to judge all the nations, for “the harvest is ripe”. This vision reminds us of the parable of the wheat and tares (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43) which implies Christ’s judgment at the end. And the church is always to remain aware of that her mission on earth is closely related to this harvest at Christ’s second coming.

D. King of kings and Lord of lords

In 19:11-21 the exalted Christ, the Son of Man, is depicted as a warrior and the “King of kings and Lord of lords” who is leading the armies of heaven and coming to wage war against the nations, the beast, the false prophet and their armies who are destroyed and punished forever in the lake of fire. Though the rider on a white horse is not named as the Son of Man.

However, the description of the warrior is pointing out he is the Son of Man. His flaming eyes, and sharp sword from his mouth (1:13-14, 16), his diadems (14:14), his name is called faithful and true (1:5; 3:14), the Word of God (1:9; 20:4), and “King of kings and Lord of lords” which is also the name of the Lamb of God (17:14). A similar metaphor of divine warrior occurs in Isa 63:1-3 where he executes judgment on his enemies.¹⁸

This is the second time in the Apocalypse that the returning of the Lord Christ is characterized. In the first view of his returning, the Son of Man was portrayed as the Lord

¹⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 278.

¹⁸ Aune, *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary 52C, 1048-1050.

of reaping. Here he is described as the mighty warrior.¹⁹ It is a representation of Christ the almighty conqueror, commander of the armies of heaven, coming to annihilate the rebellious of earth, which are led by the powers of hell.

III. The Lamb of God

Unquestionably the main feature of the Christology in Revelation 4-22 is the designation of Christ as “the Lamb,” a title which occurs 28 times. Regarding the theology of Lamb,” Brighton made a significant definition: “While the Christology of Revelation deals primarily with the exaltation of Jesus Christ and his glorious reign, the foundation for this exalted Christology is the theology of the Lamb of God, who suffered and died and rose again.”²⁰ Usually the concept of the Lamb of God is traced to the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53:7, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” The vision of the Lamb hence portrays the manner of Christ’s victory is through death.²¹

The most paradoxical character of the Lamb is that although supreme in overwhelming power (symbolized by seven horns) and complete knowledge (symbolized by seven eyes, cf. Zech 4:10), he bears the mark of a sacrificial death. John saw the Lamb, Christ, “standing as if it had been slaughtered” (5:6). The sacrificial symbol reappears throughout Revelation (5:9, 12; 13:8; cf. 11:5, 18, 2:8; 7:14; 12:14; 19:13). Although the Lamb bears the wounds of death, he is recognized as a triumphant leader, his description in Revelation is that of a victorious conqueror. It means that the Lamb does not achieve

¹⁹ Brighton, *Revelation*, 507.

²⁰ Brighton, *Revelation*, 149.

²¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993), 184.

his position by force but by voluntary sacrifice.²² John is leading the church to see how the Lamb's sacrifice supplies both the model and the enabling strength for the church about to pass through the fiery tribulation of martyrdom and that he will win the final victory through sacrifice.²³

A. The worship of the Lamb

After conveying the vision of the adoration of the Almighty God who sitting on the heavenly throne in Chap. 4, John saw the Lamb who has triumphed through his death and resurrection and who is standing in the midst of the throne (5:6). His taking the scroll from the right hand of God is instantly praised by the two hymns in 5:9-10 and 5:11-12, followed by the doxology in 5:13-14. The worshipers increases outward from the four living creatures and the elders to the uncountable angels, and finally to every creature of the cosmos. The worship of the Lamb leads to the worship of God and the Lamb together. Ch. 5 represents the climax of Revelation. From this point on, the remainder of the book will concern itself with working out the implications of the three prophetic visions of history.²⁴

The Lamb is praised because he is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals. The Lamb is worthy to open the scroll for a threefold reason: he was slain, by his blood he ransomed saints for God, and he made them to be a kingdom and priests serving God. "That the same ascription of worth is directed both to the One upon the throne (4:11) and to the Lamb (5:9) indicates the exalted Christology of the Apocalypse."²⁵

The vision of the worship of God and the Lamb forms the focus of Revelation. It

²² Robert H. Mounce, "The Christology of the Apocalypse," *Foundations* 11 (Jan.-Mar. 1968): 45.

²³ Mitchell G. Reddish, "Martyr Christology in the Apocalypse," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (1988): 86.

²⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, "Expository Articles: Revelation 5:1-14," *Interpretation* 40JI (1986) No3: 283.

²⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 148.

overshadows every message of the book, dominating it and showing the direction and conclusion of it.²⁶ Through the entire book, the adoration in the court of heaven is reflected: 7:9-17; 8:3-5; 11:15-19; 14:1-5; 15:2-4; 19:1-8; 21:3-8; 22:1-5. These glory visions communicate consolation and hope to the church. No matter how chaotic or hostile of the world, no matter what trial or persecution they will meet, God and the Christ always control the history and the world, as a result of accomplishing full salvation and final judgment.

B. The conquering power and wrath of the Lamb

The authority of the Lamb is ultimate for he shares the very throne of God. Thus, he is worthy to open the seals, an act which is more than prophetic proclamation but takes part in the event itself. The Lamb releases the final plagues and actively directs the consummation of history. The three sevenfold visions of history from the cross to the end demonstrates the conquering power and wrath of the Lamb.

His power to conquer is clearly seen in chap. 14, 15, 17, and 19. He stands on Mt. Zion with a great company of redeemed. Those who overcame the beast standing by the sea of glass singing the “song of the Lamb”. The ten kings and the beast intend to war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (17:14). A pivot great victory is portrayed in 19:11-21. Only by the sword issued from his mouth, the victorious Lamb, exalted Christ, will destroy the beast and its armies.

As none could counter the authority of the Lamb, none can endure the fierce “wrath of the Lamb.”²⁷ The catastrophic multitude plagues represent God’s anger and judgment to

²⁶ Brighton, *Revelation*, 109.

²⁷ Mounce, “The Christology of the Apocalypse,” 47.

the unrepentant world. The Lamb receives God's authority to execute judge the unbelievers. During the period when his wrath is poured out people will eagerly seek refuge in the caves and the rocks of the mountains preferring death to encounter the Lamb's wrath (6:16). For the day of the Lord will be terrible, as Christ will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty (19:15).

There are three mighty angels (represent all the other God's angels) in Revelation execute their mission, on the behalf of the Father and the Son, revealing the victory and wrath of the Lamb. The first mighty angel proclaims asking if there is anyone worthy to receive the scroll and open its seals. By this action the victorious Lamb in the heavenly vision of God's throne is introduced (5:2). The second mighty angel appears as the brilliant Christ, reminding John of the mission that God has given to his church on earth and commanding John to proclaim the message to the world (10:1-11). This message reveals crucial significance for the persecuted church. For the Christians, though die in witness ministry, will be raised again and ascend to God's glory (11:11-12). The third mighty angel announces the fall of Babylon (18:1-3) and demonstrates her deserved judgment (18:21).²⁸

C. The eternal reunion of the Lamb and the church

The Lamb is not only the righteous judge but also the divine savior, due to salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb (7:10). From 7:9 the final reunion is anticipated with some of the most consolatory pictures in Revelation. The saints serve God all day before his throne, enjoying his sheltering in his temple (7:15). They are far away the threat of hunger, thirst and the striking of the sun (7:16). The Lamb, appearing as the shepherd, will guide his people to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear

²⁸ Brighton, *Revelation*, 253.

from their eyes (7:17).

The announcement of the eternal reunion is first made as a wedding feast in chap. 19. After celebrating God's judgment on the harlot, the heavenly hosts rejoice at the coming marriage feast of the Lamb. Their loud voice cries out, "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready" (19:7). Immediately we are told, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (19:9). The bride represents the church, the invited guests who are the Lamb's followers (14:4), also are God's people whose names are recorded in the book of the Lamb (13:8; 21:27; cf. 17:18; 20:12, 15).

The bride of the Lamb is adorned and making ready to be received by her husband. In 21:2ff. the bride is revealed to John in all her heavenly dress as the holy city, the new Jerusalem. The marriage is accompanied with a loud voice from the throne conveying great peace and consolation of God. No more tears, death, mourning, pain and crying, for God makes all things new. The contrast between the horror of the earthly city as harlot and the glory of the heavenly city as bride is extremely evident. The eternal reunion of the Lamb and the church will come true and the bride will forever remain in God's presence.

IV. Conclusion

Obviously the Christocentric presentation in the theology of Revelation is vital. It is also the fundamental of the missiology and the eschatology of this book. Christ, the Lamb of God, is described in his full resurrection glory. God, the ruler of the universe, he has definitely manifested his rule with his act in Christ who turned out not to be the Lion who devoured his enemies, but the Lamb who was slain.²⁹ His power is omnipotent. His

²⁹ M. Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation: The Lord Our God the Almighty Reigns,"

ultimate victory is assured whatever the counter-power will be. Most strikingly, according to 5:6-14, he takes his position on God's throne, and receives a universal worship that would be regarded as entirely blasphemous to offer any creature. He is nonetheless the Savior and Protector of his people, for whom the New Jerusalem is prepared.³⁰

Different roles Jesus Christ puts into operation can be seen in Revelation. As the son of Man, he is fully aware of the developments within the Christian communities, is portrayed as in their midst, and holds them in hands. As such he is the powerful, exalted Lord of God's creation who will bring all history to an end when he comes in judgment of the world.³¹ As the Lamb of God, due to his victory for God's people by his death and resurrection, he is worthy to be praised and ready to take control of the world from the mighty hand of God. He is also the good Shepherd to his people. As the angel of God, the spokesman of Word of God, he fulfills his role by using mighty angels to proclaim God's promise and judgment.

The Christocentric presentation arrives its last climax in 22:13 when Christ claims he is "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." He is the Lord of the church and all new creation. All these messages are written to encourage the church to remain faithful, even unto death in her mission and message. Indeed the entire book of Revelation becomes the consolation and strength for the church in wandering and suffering. It provides the eternal and blessed assurance for all followers of the Lamb until the day of their reunion in the new heaven and new earth.

Interpretation 40JI (1986) No3: 266.

³⁰ Guthrie, "The Christology of Revelation." 403.

³¹ Brighton, *Revelation*, 659.

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