

“Popular level guides to the Book of Revelation abound, but most of them either insist that the last book of the Bible is a road map of current events or a source for reconstructing first-century history only. Lowery avoids both of these pitfalls and deftly leads the lay person or college undergraduate down a safe path to interpretive sanity. Enjoyably written and peppered with personal illustrations, this is a welcome addition to a crowded field, and one which clearly stands out from the crowd!”

Craig L. Blomberg, Professor, Denver Seminary

“Although the book of Revelation is longer than twenty other New Testament books and comprises six percent of the entire New Testament, it is no doubt the least one read, understood, and applied. But that can change because Robert Lowery brings to today’s readers the interpretative principles used by the first readers. In doing so, Christians in every century and culture can read Revelation with clarity instead of confusion. This handbook is a valuable gold mine of guidelines for all Christians from the pulpit to the pew, from the spiritually mature to the spiritual infant, and from the scholar to the newest student of Scripture. The appendices on the Old Testament allusions in Revelation and a key to select symbols alone are worth the price of the book.”

Knofel Staton, Professor, Hope International University,
Fullerton, CA

“Dr. Lowery conducts us deeply into the symphony that is Revelation. His wise guidance helps us hear the music coming from the throne room. This deepens our devotion. And then we are drawn to worship in ways that are practical, pastoral, and evangelistic. Just as the Lamb leads.”

Tony Twist, President, TCM International Institute,
Heiligenkreuz, Austria

“For over twenty-five years I have been inspired by the teaching, scholarship, and passion of Dr. Robert Lowery. In fact, I still turn to him for biblical insights, understanding, and accurate application. He approaches one of the most intimidating books of Scripture with the precision of a surgeon and the love and concern of a close friend. Your intellect will be stretched; your assumptions challenged; and your soul infused with new hope.”

Gene Appel, Lead Pastor, Willow Creek Community Church

ROBERT A. LOWERY

Foreword by Shane J. Wood

REVELATION'S
RHAPSODY



LISTENING TO THE LYRICS
OF THE LAMB

How to Read the Book of Revelation



OAKS PRESS

Nashville, Tennessee



OAKS PRESS

Revelation's Rhapsody

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This new edition contains updated typesetting and an added foreword.

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ISBN: 978-1-970102-79-6 (Hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-970102-78-9 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-970102-80-2 (ePub)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024930617

Cover and interior design: Bryana Anderle (YouPublish.com)

Art direction: Chad Harrington (YouPublish.com)

Rhapsody

A musical composition of irregular form having
an improvisatory character . . .

A freestyle instrumental piece characterized
by dramatic changes in mood . . .

A free fantasia—an instrumental composition in which a composer yields to
his imagination in regard to form and organization of the composition . . .

Rhapsodic

Ecstatic . . . Thrilled . . . Exhilarated . . . Enthusiastic . . .

Excited . . . Elated . . . Overjoyed . . . Ravished . . .

Overcome . . . Transported . . . In heaven . . .

In seventh heaven . . . On cloud nine . . . Walking on air . . .

In orbit . . . Intoxicated . . . Delirious . . . Beaming . . .

Bouncing with joy . . . Blissful . . .

Joyful

*Even on earth, who that sings or plays well on an instrument knows
not the joy of waking music? Merely to listen often-times moves to tears,
to light-heartedness, to longings, to feelings one would not or could
not utter. What will it be in heaven to be singer, musician, listener, to
be one voice in a harmony, yet as individually listened to, approved,
commended. Heaven is revealed to earth as the homeland of music.*

— Christina Rossetti

Dedication



This book is written in memory of my mother, Adrene Lowery (1921–1992), who was the first to read Scripture to me. I pray that this work will honor her admonition to me that I should teach and write in such a way that everyone could understand God’s Word better.

This book is written in honor of my family. My wife, Marilyn, has provided encouragement throughout the project. My ministry at home and abroad would be impossible without her faithful support. My daughter and son and their spouses, Joe and Rachel Mollet and Brian and Sarah Lowery, have prayed for me and encouraged me while I worked on the book. My prayer is that my two granddaughters, Carissa and Jocelyn Mollet, will someday follow Jesus the Lamb and learn to sing his lyrics.

All books by Christians should ultimately be dedicated to the glory of God. This one is no exception.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for . . . all of you share in God’s grace with me. — Philippians 1:3–7

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Foreword

Shane J. Wood



*Revelation isn't a book about gloom and doom;
it's a book about hope, joy, victory, and rhapsody.*

— ROBERT LOWERY

*SERMON FROM THE PREACHING & TEACHING CONVENTION,
OZARK CHRISTIAN COLLEGE, FEBRUARY 22, 2010*

I just finished listening to one of the last sermons Robert Lowery ever preached, the sermon quoted above. I was at the sermon when he preached it; I knew it was on the book of Revelation, but not much else. Honestly, all I remember was weeping throughout the entire message.

He was already diagnosed with incurable cancer, already showing signs of fatigue and strain. And yet, with unique conviction, he preached a message of hope. Of resilience in the face of strain. Of strength amidst the fires of faith. “We stagger through life,” his deep voice bellowed with resolve, “but the Christian life isn’t about waiting for the storms to pass. It’s about how we learn to walk in the rain.”

As his student and teaching aide, I’d heard this theme from him before, as I spent four years under his tutelage and even more as his friend. I’d heard him give this charge. This call to patient endurance. This invitation to dance in the face of death. But this time was different. He stood on the stage, stabilizing himself by gripping a wooden stool, which embodied his message. He incarnated the message in that moment and throughout his cancer battle with a fierce tenderness fit for a follower of a crucified King.

His message was simple, even though difficult to hear: “We live in a world filled with so much mourning and not enough dancing in the name of the Lord.” As in this present volume, his sermon was centered on music—centered on not just learning the lyrics to the song of Revelation, which is essential, but also on allowing our body to be our response to the music through dancing.

The book of Revelation is saturated in hymns and singing, something Dr. Lowery honored with his paraphrase of Revelation 1:3, recounted at the outset of the sermon, “Blessed is the one who *sings* aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and *dance* to what’s written in it, because the time is near.” Indeed, the words of Scripture are beautiful to read, but far more compelling when they’re lived. Embodied. Embraced with the intimacy of a bride and a groom’s first dance.

And yet, this book testifies to an oft overlooked truth that Dr. Lowery intimately understood: dancing to the psalm of the slain Lamb is essential to

the Christian witness, yet impossible if we don’t know, first, how to *listen* to its lyrics.

Dancing to the
psalm of the
slain Lamb is
essential to the
Christian witness.

The book of Revelation suffers from misguided interpretations that transform the text into a playground for failed prophecies instead of an invitation to dance with the King. So-called prophecy experts plague the pews with self-serving predictions that call us to look for and long for wars in the Middle East

instead of self-sacrifice birthed from following a slain Lamb. Thus, the confusion and chaos that surrounds the Apocalypse of John causes many in the church to simply ignore it. Avoid it. And the church is worse off for it.

Dr. Lowery intended for this book to calm the hysteria, simplify the target, and redirect our attention to Revelation’s goal: a clearer picture of Jesus. The tools he offers quiet the chaotic din of competing voices, and allow the lyrics of the Lamb to once again be heard by his bride, who can then dance to the glory of the groom. Thus, *Revelation’s Rhapsody* provides not just a path to read Revelation but also to reclaim it as a book central to the life of the church—the church Dr. Lowery loved and taught his students, including me, to love deeper still. The church that has something more important to do than merely survive or simply predict. The church who is called to embody

FOREWORD

the lyrics of the Lamb as they dance to the hymns of heaven even though they live on the banks of Babylon.

I pray this book will do for you what Dr. Lowery's life as a whole did for me: teach you to love Jesus and his church more deeply.

Shane J. Wood

Professor of New Testament & Its Origins,
Ozark Christian College

Acknowledgements



I want to acknowledge the rich contributions my brothers and sisters in Christ made in the writing of my book.

First, to the countless congregations around the United States and in Eastern Europe who have invited me to teach and preach the book of Revelation, thank you.

Second, to the numerous students of Lincoln Christian Seminary (Lincoln, Illinois) and the TCM International Institute (Heiligenkreuz, Austria) who have taken my class on the book of Revelation and have challenged me to think and drink deeply from John's writing, thank you.

Third, to two students who reviewed the initial outline and content of my book with me in June, 2005, at Haus Edelweiss in Heiligenkreuz, Austria—Ivan Ivanov of Bulgaria and Janos Lehotay-Kery of Hungary—thank you.

Fourth, to the fifteen students who read an early draft of the book and spent a week with me in October, 2005, discussing the content—Tom Byford, Mike Cahill, Sam Draper, Rod Godley, Ann Hastings, Dee Kinman, Matt Martin, Brent McCrory, Doug Phillips, Andrew Ramey, Greg Robbins, Paul Stroup, Bryce Wiley, Heath Williams, and Shane Wood—your candor and critiques made the book a better one.

Fifth, to students of the Word—Gene Appel, Craig Blomberg, Paul Boatman, Jim Boudouris, Ken Cooper, Tom Ewald, Dinelle Frankland, Tom and Stephenie Graham, Gary Hall, J. K. Jones, Ronnie Jones, Brian Lowery, David McFadden, Jim and Debbie Poer, Jeff Snell, Bob Szoke, Tom Tanner, Tony Twist, and Marilyn Lowery—individuals who took time out of very busy schedules to read and critique one or more drafts, thank you. In addition to these individuals, Gerry and Joan Baldwin read the very first draft and made helpful editorial and formatting suggestions.

Three individuals need to be mentioned in a special way. Ann Hastings read several of the drafts, and her expertise in editing proved invaluable. She pulled no punches; the red ink flowed from her pen. Shane Wood has been my research assistant par excellence and provided many helpful insights from the beginning to the end of the project. He went the second mile. Carmen Trenton graciously gave hundreds of hours reading, discussing, and editing the work. She balanced grace and truth as she pressed me time and again for greater clarity, and every paragraph benefited from her scrutiny.

To Richard and Judith Rowe who provided me a retreat center by allowing me to stay at their cabin on Lake Michigan, thank you. It was in that peaceful setting that the first draft of the book was written in six days, August 28–September 2, 2005. To my son, Brian, one of the most gifted thinkers, preachers, and teachers I have ever had the privilege to teach, thank you. It was on a trip to Madison, Wisconsin, to see a Bob Dylan concert in the Fall of 1999 that you planted the seed for this book. You respectfully rebuked me for not doing more writing on Revelation and dismantled my excuses one by one. That conversation set the project in motion.

To the administration of Lincoln Christian Seminary, thank you for the sabbatical time so that I could research, reflect, and write. Especially supportive were President Keith Ray, Vice President of Academics Tom Tanner, Seminary Associate Dean Paul Boatman, and Becky Boggs, my administrative assistant.

To the staff of College Press and Logos Bible Software, thank you for supporting and promoting the project.

PROLOGUE

An Invitation to Listen to the Lyrics of the Lamb

Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. . . . The one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. . . . Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing There before me was a pale horse! . . . The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. . . . The great dragon was hurled down— . . . And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. . . . Let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666. . . . Armageddon. . . . Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! . . . Then I saw a great white throne Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

— REV. 1:16; 4:3; 5:6; 6:8; 9:7; 12:9;
13:1, 18; 16:16; 18:2; 20:11; 21:9



Have you ever begun to read the book of Revelation only to be defeated by a swirling set of bewildering images: winged creatures, beasts, trumpets, bowls, the number 666? If so, then my book is for you. I have written out of *compassion* for those who have tried to read, understand, and apply the book and who have abandoned hope of ever understanding it.

Are you ever puzzled at the way some authors, preachers, and teachers use the book to predict the future, all the way from interpreting the most recent events in the Middle East to pinpointing the date of Christ's return? Then my book is for you. I write out of *concern* because we live in an era when many disciples of Jesus are obsessed with using Revelation to know and control the future.

Do you believe that Revelation has nothing to do with your life as a follower of Jesus? Then my book of guidelines for interpreting John's message is for you. I write out of *conviction* that Revelation's message needs to be heard and obeyed by God's people.

Revelation's
message needs
to be heard
and obeyed.

Over the years, I have met people from all walks of life who are troubled by Revelation. Church members along with college and seminary students have confessed to being baffled by Revelation's mysterious language. Seasoned preachers, and not a few professors, have disclosed to me that they are puzzled by the work. It is often perceived to be a favorite book of weird people or individuals who have too much time on their hands. Perhaps you have blushed because of comments made by those who promote embarrassingly sensationalistic and inevitably incorrect interpretations, rooted in motives not always noble.

My writing this book stems from years of personal study and teaching the Bible in the context of Christian community. I did not compose it in some ivory tower divorced from believers and from conditions in our world. Instead, I offer here insights I have presented in congregations, conferences, conventions, colleges, and seminaries, at home and abroad. I want Christians to replace the word "mysterious" with "meaningful" when they study the book. As a student and teacher of Scripture, I have tried to take seriously the counsel of Ernst Käsemann:

It would do us good to read and re-read the Revelation of John. . . . Patmos is not an idyllic haven of rest for retired scholars who look back on a hard-working life of piety and integrity. . . . For over there on the mainland world history is moving, and the churches are spent and either do not see it or try to come to terms with it. They praise Christ as the Lord of heaven, and do not hear him saying to them: 'The world and all that is in it is mine.' . . . Christianity has to take notice of earthly things if it is to be worthy of its call to heavenly things.¹

On one occasion, one of my colleagues asked me a perceptive question: "Bob, what tone will your book have?" Let me share my response. First, in dealing with how to read a book that so many people view as unapproachable, I told him that I wanted this book to be a friendly one. Even though I hope my work reflects solid scholarship, I want it to appeal to people from all

backgrounds, from individuals in congregations who love God's Word and desire to understand it better, to preachers who desire to pass on the whole counsel of God, to professors who are equipping students to be faithful interpreters, and to the curious who wonder whether God speaks to them through the apostle John, the author of Revelation.

In the long run, I believe the approach laid out in this book makes Revelation much easier to understand. My guidelines will probably not lead you to the sensationalistic interpretations that other methods produce: end-times hysteria, date-setting craze, rapture fever, Antichrist obsession, and "666" mania. And yet from another perspective, I believe my approach will lead to Revelation becoming even more sensational, though in a surprising way. How? It will challenge you, motivate you, excite you to go deeper into the book. Indeed, the deeper you go into the book, the deeper will be your understanding, and you will become a better disciple of Jesus in light of the future God has revealed for his people.

My regret is that those of us who have approached Revelation the way I recommend have not been passionate or urgent enough in relating a different way to read and apply it. When you begin applying the guidelines of my book in your own study, you will see that you have questions to answer: What view of the future will influence how you live now? What kind of Jesus do you want to follow? What kind of follower of Jesus do you want to be?

Often the work of Bible scholars is too far removed from the needs of the local congregation. In light of this concern, the book avoids, wherever possible, the technical jargon often associated with academic study.² I want Christians from a diversity of backgrounds to read this book. It is often anecdotal in style as well. This is the case, in part, because I have presented the material to audiences in a variety of settings. Moreover, because I have had the opportunity to teach in other cultures, my understanding has been enriched significantly. In particular, as I have taught throughout Eastern Europe, students have raised issues and questions that drive me time and again to apply the universal message of Revelation today. I have tried to balance this desire to apply the book today with an appreciation for how the original audience would have understood it.

I want my book to be readable, a gift to the church at home and abroad. As John wrote a circular letter for Christians with diverse backgrounds (Rev. 1:9, 11), so I desire this book to be a circular one, speaking to students



Lamb of God, who takes away
the sins of the world,
Have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, who takes away
the sins of the world,
Grant us peace.

“AGNUS DEI (LAMB OF GOD)”
SEVENTH CENTURY

of Scripture throughout the world who have a variety of levels of understanding and skills. This is not a book for “idiots”;³ it is one for those who are devoted to God and who are willing to dig deeply to correctly handle the Word of truth recorded by John.

I gave a second response to my colleague. Even though I want to provide a book that is approachable for a variety of audiences, I do not want it to be argumentative in tone. I want the book to be conciliatory. The subject of Christ’s final return in general, and the book of Revelation in particular, causes considerable controversy, to say the least. Sides are drawn up, and a censorious spirit often develops. One’s orthodoxy is either suspect or confirmed. I suggest a way to read Revelation that finds its roots deep in the history of the church and is viewed as a valid approach by many contemporary scholars who accept the trustworthiness of Scripture. And yet I am afraid it is an approach that is not known by many.

Naturally, then, my conclusions will come into conflict with others, and my interpretive approach will not be accepted by all. But I want to be as clear and accurate as possible while avoiding a combative attitude and approach. I have deliberately made the effort to be restrained and respectful. Above all, I want the book to advance the dialogue on the best way to read Revelation.

Therefore, I hope that three of the designations often associated with the apostle and author John will also be associated with my effort. First, I write as a *pastor*. My desire is to shepherd God’s people in reading Revelation. I want disciples of Jesus to see how John’s message can help them on their journey to their eternal home where they will dwell with God.

Second, I write as a *preacher* who wants to help people see the good news about Jesus (for those who embrace the gospel) and the bad news (for those who reject or abandon the good news) found in John’s work. The message of the book needs to be heard in the twenty-first century just as much as it did in the first century, if not more.

Third, I write as a *professor* who respects the prophetic spirit of the book. Revelation is prophetic in both character and intention. John the prophet viewed his task as presenting the Word and will of God to the people of God in a particular place at a particular time. It is a prophetic work that still speaks today. John was given the opportunity to penetrate to the eternal issues behind the crises of his day and our day as well. Like his Old Testament predecessors, John reminded the recipients of God’s blessings. At the

same time, he also revealed to God's people their duties to be carried out in challenging times. And he reassured them that God's purposes would indeed be fulfilled.

As a professor who is both a pastor and a preacher, I want the message of Revelation to get into the heads and hearts of followers of Christ. Why? So that it may be lived out by those who live in hostile or seductive cultures.

God willing, this book is the first volume of a proposed three-volume series. A second book is to be a commentary based on the interpretive principles found in this book. Its goal will be to make known in contemporary language, metaphors, and illustrations the message of the book of Revelation. It will not be a verse-by-verse treatment but an examination and explanation of the symbolism in each chapter, moving back and forth between the symbols' meanings for John's readers and possible meanings for us today. A final volume is to focus on issues such as setting a date for Christ's return or other events, the millennium, antichrist, rapture, the mark of the beast, Armageddon, and more.

To receive maximum benefit as you read the following chapters, I encourage you to read Scriptures cited and endnotes as well. I know that often we skip over them, but we do so at great risk. Reading the verses will help you check out the accuracy of my conclusions in light of God's Word. You will notice that I include additional material in endnotes as well. Even though you could read my book without consulting the notes, you will find they serve a variety of functions. Sometimes I use notes to simply document quotations, express my indebtedness to an author, or provide further support for a particular point being presented. Other times I use notes to direct you to additional studies. I also use them to make observations or raise questions for you to pursue on your own.

As I worked on my book, I always tried to keep in mind the wise counsel my mother penned in a Bible she gave to me in 1969:

My Dear Son,

It is my prayer that you will always follow the teachings of this book. May it always remind you that through the years he is the greatest teacher and the most educated person who ever lived, yet his teachings were simple enough that everyone could understand them.

PROLOGUE

My son, use your wisdom to win others to him. May God grant you the power to continue to serve him all your life. An education is very important but most important is the education of others for Christ.

Let your education be a tool for Christ and not a tool for man.

My prayer for you as you read this book is that it may help you bring glory to the Lamb by following him even more closely.