

Revelation and Work

Introduction

The Book of Revelation provides some of the keenest insights in Scripture concerning the “big picture” of work. But it is a tough nut to crack, not only because of its intrinsic difficulty, but because of the myriad interpretations that have grown up around the book. We cannot hope to solve these problems here, but we may (perhaps) find enough common ground to glean insights from the final book of the Bible.

Perhaps the greatest gap in interpretation is between those who see the book as primarily future, addressing the absolute end of history from chapter 6 on, and those who see most of the book as relating to events around the time John wrote (generally seen as the late first century AD). The good news is that responsible interpreters who hold the “futurist” view acknowledge that the events in the future are modeled on God’s work in the past, most notably in Creation and the Exodus from Egypt. Likewise, even those who interpret the book primarily from the standpoint of the first century acknowledge that it does talk about the ultimate future (e.g. the New Jerusalem). For this reason, no one should object to finding *enduring spiritual truths* in the images of the book, nor in seeing a significant future orientation in the promises contained within it.

“The Time is Near”

Before the book is even a few verses old, John says something that might seem to undercut a robust theology of work: “The time is near!” Some take this to mean that John thought Jesus was coming right away in his lifetime, and that he got it wrong; others believe it means that once the end times events start happening, they will move quickly. Neither of these fit well with the rest of the NT, since it is clear that in some sense the “end times” begin with the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Heb. 1:1, 1 Cor. 10:11, Acts 2:17). So it is best to take “The time is near” to mean, “God’s kingdom is in your face!” with the implicit question, “How then are you going to live?” The apparent certainties of everyday life must be seen against the kingdom of God, which is already breaking into the world.

This has profound consequences for our view of work. While there is much in Scripture to commend work, nothing in the present state of affairs should be viewed as absolute. As we will see, work done faithfully for God’s glory has enduring value, but God must always be allowed the first and final word. Living in light of his values is critical; there can be no compromise with the world system and its idolatrous ways.

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Messages to the Churches (Chapters 2 and 3)

The messages to the seven churches emphasize the importance of *works* in the Christian life, and thus indirectly contribute to a proper understanding of work in general. The messages to several churches begin, “I know your works....” Ephesus is rebuked for not doing the works they did at first (2:5), and Sardis likewise has not completed the work it ought to have done for Jesus (3:2).

It bears repeating that “works” are not a bad thing in the Bible. They are rather the concrete expression of our love for God. The myth that God only cares about our heart and our feelings is a major reason work in general has been given short shrift in some Protestant circles.

There is evidence that the notorious worldliness of the Laodicean church was evident in its outlook on work and economics. When Jesus counsels them to buy from him gold refined in the fire, white garments to hide their nakedness, and salve to heal their eyes, he is likely playing off three of the major industries in Laodicea: banking, wool, and ophthalmology. It seems likely that the Laodiceans assumed that the resources available to them from their culture were all they needed in life. Churches, especially in prosperous countries, must recognize that material abundance can often mask spiritual poverty. Success in our work should never lead us to a sense of self-sufficiency.

The Throne Room of God (Chapters 4 and 5)

John’s vision in chapters 4 and 5 is at the heart of Revelation. It is in essence a visualization of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Through Jesus’ faithful witness and sacrificial death, God’s kingdom will come.

We may highlight from chapter 4 that God is praised precisely as creator of all things (esp. 4:11; cf. 14:7, where the essence of the “good news” is to worship “the one who made heaven and earth and sea and springs of water”). The visible world is not an afterthought, or a mere prelude to heaven, but an expression of God’s glory, and the basis upon which his creatures may praise him. This again is foundational for a proper understanding of work. If the world is simply an illusion separating us from the real life of heaven, work in the world will necessarily be seen as more or less a complete waste of time. If, by contrast, the world is the good creation of God, the prospects for meaningful work become more hopeful. While we must remember the world is always contingent upon God, and that the present world order is subject to considerable shaking up, it is equally important to remember that the world as God’s creation stands meaningfully in his presence, and is designed for his praise.

It is worth noting in this regard that the redemption secured by Christ in chapter 5, which permits God’s kingdom to move forward, is precipitated by Christ’s work *in the visible creation*. As Jacques Ellul notes, Jesus’ reception of the kingdom is based on his work on earth: “The terrestrial event provokes the celestial event...What happens in the divine world is defined, determined, provoked by the venture of Jesus upon the earth”.¹

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse* (trans. G.W. Schreiner; NY: Seabury, 1977), 47-48.

The Strange Way Forward (Chapters 6-16)

God's plan to advance his kingdom, however, takes a surprising turn: before deliverance comes disaster. Yet it is perhaps not so surprising as all that: Chapters 6-16 are most reminiscent of the paradigmatic episode of God's deliverance of his people, the Exodus from Egypt. Water turning to blood, locust plagues, darkening of the heavenly bodies: all these mark out that God is bringing about the end times exodus of his people from the latter day Pharaohs who oppress them. Again, whether we imagine this as largely in John's day or at some point in the future does not take away the basic point. God's ways are consistent from age to age; the patterns of history repeat as God works his way towards the new heavens and new earth.²

The importance of this for the workplace is profound. Let us take the well-known four horsemen of the Apocalypse (chapter 6). It is generally agreed that they represent War and its devastating consequences of death, famine, and plague.³ Especially of interest for us is the notice in 6:6, "Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!'" (NIV). While the notice about the oil and wine is obscure (it may signify that the judgment is only partial⁴), the prices of the wheat and barley are clearly inflated (Aune says eight times the normal price of wheat, five and one thirds times the normal price of barley).⁵

While this could be referring to some future devastation, the cycle is all too familiar to every generation: humanity's inability to get along peaceably leads to horrific economic consequences. Since Christians are caught up in these sufferings (see the fifth seal, 6:9-11), we must face the fact that our businesses and jobs are often subjected to forces beyond our control. As awful as these forces may be, however, another message of Revelation 6 is that they are under God's control. To the extent that we are able, we must strive to create workplaces where justice is upheld and where people can experience the blessing of developing the gifts God has given them. But we must also recognize that God's providence permits catastrophes to enter our lives as well. Revelation encourages us to look to the ultimate destination of the New Jerusalem in the midst of an often bumpy road.

² If we take Revelation as primarily focused on John's day, the "exodus" theme might refer in the first instance to the fact that those who maintain their faithful witness will "go out" to God's presence upon their death. A futurist view would lay emphasis on the literal overthrow of the wicked kingdoms, and the entry of God's people in the millennial kingdom (which may or may not be conceived of as centered in Israel). In any case, in both scenarios, the ultimate fulfillment of the exodus motif is the entry of God's people into the New Jerusalem (see below).

³ See, e.g., Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.132-34; Osborne, p.274; G.K. Beale, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp.370-71.

⁴ For authors favoring this view, see the discussion in Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p.281.

⁵ See the extensive discussion in David E. Aune, Rev. 6-16, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 52b (Dallas: Word, 1998), pp.397-400.

There is also perhaps an implicit challenge in 6:6 to avoid exploiting the vulnerable in the time of need. Economic realities may require price hikes in a crisis, but that is no excuse for making a tidy profit from the misery of others.

The bowl judgments in chapters 8-9 teach a similar lesson, though here the emphasis is on environmental disaster. Since the precise mechanics are not mentioned, the ecological devastation could perhaps involve human pollution as well as more overtly supernatural phenomena. The key is that God strikes the world in its capacity as the nurturer of idolatrous humanity. This is done not only to punish, but to wake people up to the fact that, as the old song says, “there is no hiding place down here”. You cannot engineer your way out of God’s presence; you cannot manipulate the environment to serve as a shelter from him.

As Revelation moves on, the emphasis shifts from God’s judgments on the world to the faithful witness of his people under the reign of the Beast (who may be a single idolatrous ruler at the very end of history, or the archetype of all such idolatrous rulers). It is (deliberately) ironic that the faithful “conquerors” (chapters 2-3) are at one level “conquered” by the Beast (13:7), though they are ultimately vindicated by God (11:11). The suffering of the saints includes economic suffering: those who refuse the notorious “mark of the Beast” are not allowed to “buy or sell” (13:17). The analogies with the “mark” of Ezekiel 9 suggests that the mark of the Beast is a symbol for adherence to the idolatrous (Roman?) system (666 can render “Nero Caesar”, the consummate bad emperor). But even if one takes a more literal and futurist view, the spiritual lesson is clear: the refusal to follow the world’s system of false worship can sometimes lead to negative economic consequences for the faithful. This can happen in a greater or lesser way in any society.⁶ Christians must always set their mind to do what is right and honoring to God, realizing that this could lead to exclusion from economic opportunity. Judgment on idolaters is certain, and no amount of financial gain is worth throwing one’s lot in with those who oppose God. (This is why the beast-followers of chapter 13 are immediately contrasted with the 144,000 of chapter 14, “in whose mouths there is no lie”, 14:5. They maintain their faithful and true witness to God no matter what.)⁷

A Tale of Two Cities (Chapters 17-22)

The most important insights into the big picture of work, however, come in the concluding chapters, where the worldly city Babylon is set against God’s city, the New Jerusalem. The introductions of the cities in 17:1 and 21:9 are set in clear parallel: “Come I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute that sits on many waters”/“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the lamb”.

Babylon represents the dead end street of humanity’s attempt to build their culture apart from God. It has every appearance of being the paradise humanity has always longed for. It is no coincidence that its gold and jewels recall those of the New Jerusalem (17:4). Like the New Jerusalem, Babylon exercises authority over the nations and receives their wealth (note the references to “the merchants of the earth” in 18:3, and the lament of the sea-traders in 18:15-19).

⁶ See the judicious comments of Osborne, p.518.

⁷ John is not denying that following God’s ways can lead to positive economic consequences (as is clearly taught in, e.g., Proverbs. In keeping with the rest of the book, he is saying that the forces of evil can (under God’s control) twist things such that what should lead to blessing instead leads to suffering.

But it is in fact a counterfeit, doomed to be exposed by God in the final judgment. Especially instructive is the cargo list in 18:11-13 (see Bauckham, *Economic Critique*), which describes the luxury goods flowing into Babylon. The list is modeled on Ezekiel 27:12-22 and the fall of Tyre, but it has been updated to include the luxury goods popular in Rome in John's day. "The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more-- cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men." The final note about "souls of men" likely relates to the slave trade, and it is the final nail in the coffin of Babylon's exploitative empire: she will stop at nothing, not even trafficking in human flesh, in pursuit of sensual self-indulgence.

The lesson that God would judge a city for its economic practices is a sobering thought. Economics is clearly a moral issue in the book of Revelation. The fact that much of the condemnation appears to stem from its self-indulgence should hit with particular force at modern consumer culture, where the constant search for more and better can lead to a myopic focus on satisfying real or imagined material needs. But the most worrisome thing of all is that Babylon looks *so close* to the New Jerusalem. God did create a good world; we are meant to enjoy life; God does delight in the beautiful things of earth. If the world system were a self-evident cesspool, the temptation for Christians to fall to its allures would be small. It is precisely the genuine benefits of technological advance and extensive trading networks that constitutes the danger. Babylon promises all the glories of Eden, without the intrusive presence of God. It slowly but inexorably twists the good gifts of God – economic interchange, agricultural abundance, diligent craftsmanship – into the service of false gods.

At this point, one might feel that any participation in the world economy – or even any local economy – must be so fraught with idolatry that the only solution is to withdraw completely and live alone in the wilderness. But Revelation offers an alternative vision of life together: the New Jerusalem. This "the city that comes down from heaven", and as such it is the consummate representation of God's grace. It stands in stark contrast to the self-made monstrosity that is Babylon.⁸

At one level, the New Jerusalem is a return to Eden: there is a river flowing through its midst, with the tree of life standing by with fruit-laden branches and leaves for the healing of the nations (22:2). Humanity can once again walk in peace with God. Indeed, it outstrips Eden, since the glory of the Lord itself provides the illumination for the city (22:5)

But the New Jerusalem is not simply a new and better garden: it is a garden-city, the urban ideal that forms the counterweight to Babylon. There is, for instance, still meaningful human participation in the life of the celestial city come to earth. Central to this, of course, is the worship people bring to God and the Lamb. But there seems to be more than this in the note that "they will bring the glory and honor of the nations" into the New Jerusalem (21:24-26). In the ancient world, it was desirable to build a temple with the best materials from all over the world; this is what Solomon did for the temple in Jerusalem. More than that, people would bring gifts from far and wide to adorn the temple after its completion. It is

⁸ See above all Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.126-43.

probable that the image of kings bringing their gifts to the New Jerusalem flows from this background. It does not seem too much of a stretch to imagine that these gifts are the products of human culture, devoted now to the glory of God.⁹

We must also consider the implications of OT visions of the future which see it in meaningful continuity with present day life. Isaiah 65, for example, is a critical background text for Rev. 21-2, and provides its foundational teaching, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (NIV, cf. Rev. 21:1). Yet this same chapter says of the future blessings of God’s people, “They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. (Isa. 65:21-22, NIV). We can certainly argue that Isaiah is pointing, in ways suitable to his times, to something much greater than mere agricultural abundance; but he can hardly be pointing to less. Yet *less* is precisely what is typically offered in a vision of “heaven” consisting of nothing more than clouds, harps, and white robes.

Parsing out precisely how this works is not easy. Will I still farm in the new heavens and new earth? If I am a godly computer programmer, is my 1.0 software consigned to the flames while the advanced 2.0 version enters the heavenly city? The Bible does not answer these types of questions directly, but we may once more step back and look at the big picture. God created humans to exercise dominion over the earth, which entails creativity. Would it be sensible for such a God to then turn and regard work done in faith as useless, and cast it aside? On balance, it seems far more likely that he would raise it up and perfect all that is done for his glory. Likewise, the prophetic vision of the future envisions people engaged in meaningful activity in the creation. Since God does not go into detail as to how this transfer of products from the now-world to the new-world works, or what exact things we might be doing in the future state, we can only guess at what this means concretely. But it does mean that you can “always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” 1 Cor. 15:58¹⁰

Applications in today’s workplace

What does this all mean for everyday life in the workplace? Revelation does not provide detailed instructions for best business practice, but it does provide some important guidelines, especially with respect to big picture issues. It is not enough to burrow your head down and “do your job” or grow your

⁹ Cf. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), p.279: “Nothing from the old order which has value in the sight of God is debarred from entry into the new. John’s heaven is no world-denying Nirvana, into which men may escape from the incurable ills of sublunary existence, but the seal of affirmation on the goodness of God’s creation. The treasure that men find laid up in heaven turns out to be *the treasures and wealth of the nations*, the best they have known and loved on earth redeemed of all imperfections and transfigured by the radiance of God. See also Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody, MA:Henrickson. 2006), pp.72-77.

¹⁰ On all this, see Cosden, *Heavenly Good*, *passim*; and Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), esp. pp.88-122.

business. You have to have some sense of where things are going, and why you are doing what you are doing.

The greater one's position of authority is, the greater one's responsibility is to see that business is directed towards ends that will glorify God, and that it is practiced in a way that expresses love for neighbor. In contrast to the exploitative nature of Babylon, Christian business should strive for mutual benefit: a fair exchange of goods and services, just treatment of workers, and a view towards the long-term good of the people and societies partnering in the enterprise.

While most businesses today are not formally or informally affiliated with pagan gods (as they often were in the ancient world), subtler forms of idolatry can creep in unawares. One contemporary analogue to biblical Babylon would be a company that sees its own profit and continuity as the ultimate goal of its existence (with perhaps the CEO on the cosmic throne!). We must always remember that all of life is open to God and subject to his approval or disapproval. The annihilation of Babylon serves as a grim reminder that God is not mocked, and that this goes for our business dealings as much as "religious" concerns.

Ultimately, these loyalties reveal themselves in deeds. Those who commit themselves to the way of Jesus must strive to be above reproach in their ethics. The saints stand in abiding need of the forgiveness available through Jesus' blood, but they are called to imitate his fateful witness in their everyday lives.

But it is appropriate to conclude with the positive vision of the New Jerusalem. While there is necessarily a radical break between the now world and the new world, there is also a strong sense of continuity between the two. After all, the New Jerusalem is still the New *Jerusalem*. It shares things in common with the earthly city; indeed, it can be seen at one level as the consummation of all that the earthly Jerusalem aspired to be. In the same way, our future is ultimately a gift of God. Yet in the mysteries of his creative goodness, "our works follow after us" (14:13); certainly our deeds of kindness and our worship to God; but the works of our hands as well.

Key Verses and Themes

Revelation 13:17

Revelation 18

Passages related to non-church work

Revelation 18-22

Passages important for developing a theology of work