

The  
**APOCALYPTIC HEART**

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The Book of Revelation in an unjust world

RON BROWNING

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The Apocalyptic Heart  
The Book of Revelation in an Unjust World  
By Browning, Ron  
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Book design: John Healy  
Cover image: *Landmine victim mother and child* painted by Maung Maung Tinn based on a photo by Yuzo Uda

Yuzo Uda was born in Kobe, Japan, in 1963. After studying photography in Boston, he began his career as a photojournalist, covering the civil war in El Salvador from 1990-92 as a freelancer. Focusing on Southeast Asia and Central America, he continued to document life under military rule, the lives of indigenous peoples, and global poverty. In 1995, he studied at the Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies at Kobe University, receiving a master's degree in international law.

for  
David Townsend S.J.  
scriptural exponent and friend



*The Apocalypse is our life.*

Fr Tom Hopko, Orthodox Church in America

*I look out on the ocean, the immensity of God and the vastness of his Coming.*

St Simeon the New Theologian, 6<sup>th</sup> cent.

*This is the end of the beginning of my life.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, before being hanged, 1945

*You wept over Jerusalem, O Christ, see now your prophecy extend, as we enter the eclipse of our God.*

Jim Cotter

*If you get there before I do ... tell my brothers and sisters I am coming there too.*

Negro Spiritual



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## INTRODUCTION

*Blessed are those who hear this prophecy and take it to heart. 1:3*

In these meditations the interpretation of the book of Revelation that I will use is based on the directions of some current scholarship, especially as it comes to us from contexts of oppression. Eastern Orthodox understandings will also help in this endeavor. The vision that John the writer records is both profoundly political and spiritual.

In most discussions about how to interpret Revelation, it is the cataclysms that become the main issue in question. My conviction is that the interpreters that I make use of here are able to see clearly what the cataclysms in the text actually mean.

It is helpful, therefore, to know from the start what good interpretation of the book is and what it is not. I offer these simple guidelines as a framework in the hope that they will help you, the reader, both with the chapters that follow and with your own reflective reading of the text of Revelation:

1. **The Risen Christ** stands at the centre of the vision. The centre of the vision is not the catastrophes. He is the sacrificed Lamb and he stands as a unique figure in human history as the redeemer, having dramatically shifted its course towards deconstruction and reconstruction.
2. The **symbolic nature** of the vision described needs to be emphasised whilst reflecting on the text. We do not read the events that John sees as literally happening (Rev.4ff). They represent something.
3. **The catastrophes** represent the destructive forces that have been happening in the course of history - past and present. They are not telling us what is about to happen in the future (of our history). Yet, they will continue into the future and intensify (see #6).
4. **The numbers** are to be understood symbolically, not literally.

5. John's vision is **prophecy**, as he informs us. It is not a set of predictions of future history in any detail. As prophecy, he is presenting a picture to the churches of his time and in each generation that is to challenge and encourage believers in their faith and action. That is what biblical prophecy always does.
6. There is a second meaning to the catastrophes. They represent **the clash** between the decision of God - based on the victory of the Lamb - and the forces of evil, finally to defeat them and culminate history. They are not displaying a God punishing humanity. God loves the Creation, as the cross of Christ displays, and will bring it to its completion, with mercy and justice.
7. John's encouragement to believers is to **be strong** because they will overcome the evils at hand, which may result in the eventuality of dying for their faith. They participate in the drama of history coming to its close. They are not bystanders. The witness and the prayers (in life and in death) of the saints and martyrs will hasten the coming of the Consummation.

The whole text is a letter written by John to the churches. The initial hearers of the letter did not need a framework like the one I am suggesting here. Their historical setting provided the framework. They understood the letter accordingly. But today, in a different setting, we need a framework.

Each chapter of the first section of this book is introduced by a verse from Revelation in order to act as a window into a key topic of John's vision; I then proceed to discuss the meaning of that topic for our lives today. In the second section broader apocalyptic themes are explored.

My own experience of working with refugees in recent years is brought into the reflections to provide examples and help anchor the topics within today's world.

BASED ON THE TEXT



## CHAPTER ONE

### Receiving the Vision

*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. He then placed his right hand on me and said, "Do not be afraid, I am the first and the last." 1:17*

Most people would rather not receive the vision that is held forth in the book of Revelation. It has gained bad press over the centuries as the domain of fanatics and fundamentalists. It is violent and bizarre in several of its passages, and is therefore hard to interpret. "And so are you having nightmares?" a church leader asked me when I told him I was contemplating writing this book.

I was led to examine Revelation by means of an unusual route and believe now that it holds an important place in the mainstream of Christian thinking, presenting a fascinating symbolic profile to believers, inquirers and non-believers alike.

It was refugees that led me to drink of this well. Working with Karen people from Burma who had resettled in Australia from refugee camps in Thailand, I was asked by the church youth in 2010 to lead studies on Revelation. Their request led me for the first time to consider the text of the book seriously. I soon realised that it is a significant part of the bible for them and that they wanted a helpful interpretation of it, being familiar, as they were, with the misinterpretations that are presented by sects like the Jehovah Witnesses.

As I began to delve into commentaries, I soon came across contributions by writers who were reflecting on the book within oppressed situations, having a similar background to the refugees with whom I was working. In particular, I discovered two volumes, one by Allan Boesak, written during the apartheid days of South Africa, and the other by Pablo