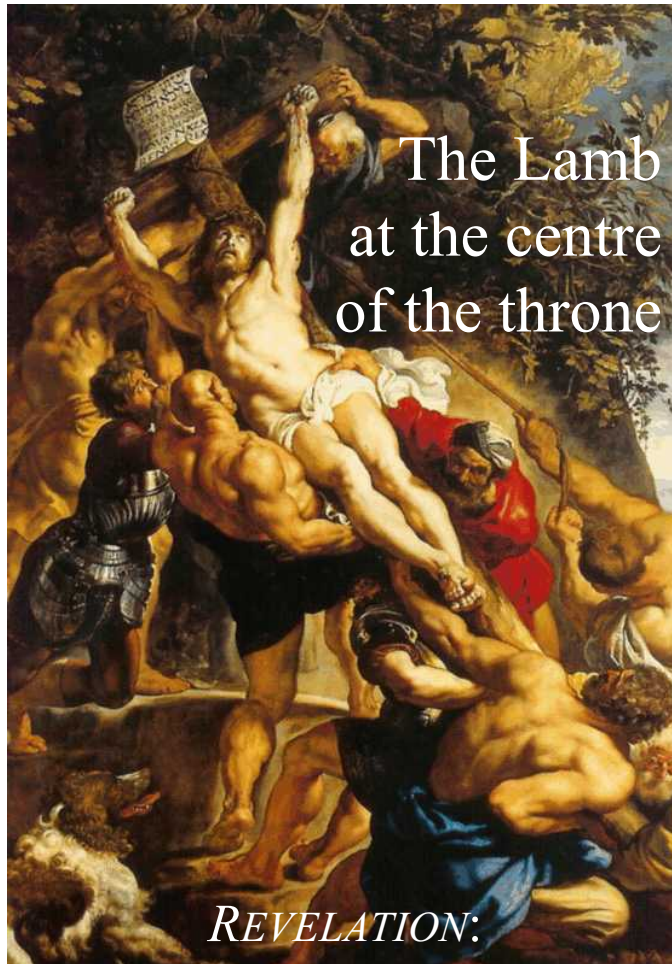


# APOLOGIA

... always be ready to give a defense [Greek, *apologia*]

to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ... 1 PETER 3:15

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The Lamb  
at the centre  
of the throne

*REVELATION:*

ROADMAP OF THE FUTURE?  
RALLY FOR REGIME CHANGE?  
— OR *REALLY* RADICAL RELIGION?

By David Aspinall

## The Lamb at the Centre of the Throne

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### Revelation:

Roadmap of the future,  
regime change — or *really* radical religion?

The cults are intoxicated with Revelation. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, have published at least 6 books purporting to explain it. By contrast, the Watchtower has published NO expositions of Genesis, Acts, Romans or any of the gospels. Alas, many in the church, fed by several famous TV preachers, exhibit a similar intoxication. On the other hand, millions of Christians virtually ignore the last book of the Bible.

Yet Revelation is the ONLY Bible book which pronounces blessing on those who hear its reading.

But WHAT blessing would God vouchsafe those who heard the public reading of this book in 1<sup>st</sup> century? Would they gain thereby an infallible roadmap to future events? A timetable of history? A grab bag of alluring and lurid images and sound bites for global evangelism? Insurance against having to face tribulation?

The BLESSING attached to Revelation was intimately related to the situation of its original hearers. The Christians in Asia Minor were facing the first major outbreak of systematic persecution. Revelation's message was a comfort to those seeking solace. But a SHOCK to those who would seek to find in the gospel a means of gain – *WORLDLY* gain. Why a SHOCK? To answer that we have to address other questions which will help us define key turning points in the life of the early church.

What was the great turning point in the spiritual life of Peter? Might I suggest his shock as he sheathed his sword after receiving a rebuke from his Master – “those who live by the sword shall die by the sword”. We can imagine the confusion in Peter’s mind ... isn’t it the right, nay, the **responsibility** of the sons of the kingdom to FIGHT for the King?

It is ironic – though perhaps not surprising – that Peter’s great theme, controlling concept in his public preaching became the **suffering servant** of Isaiah – not the **militant Messiah** of Judaism. Such was the staggering impact on Peter’s mind (& heart) of this new view of God’s way with man – HOW does God save? Not by the sword but by sacrifice. This was a radical lesson for all the apostles, at least one of whom, Simon the zealot, bears a name which reveals his brand of political radicalism

Later in Acts we find Philip on the desert road explaining Peter’s central text, Isaiah 53, to a puzzled convert to Judaism (Acts 8:32). Did not every one trained in Judaism, who looked for some political solution to the oppression of Rome in the promises to their ancient military hero David – did not such ancient Zionists stumble over this: “As a SHEEP he was led to the slaughter, as a LAMB silent before its shearer ...”. Who is this? The eunuch knew no such Jewish hero. What could be more unsettling to a patriot’s **self-esteem** than this prophecy of the Perfect Man?

Does not such a vision of the Servant called to suffer reduce all human pride to vanity? “NOTHING in my hands I bring ...” does not come easily to the lips of one whose heart takes pride in religious superiority. But the lesson in truly radical religion was learned – the first disciples would rather die than fight for their faith. LAMBS following the Lamb wherever He leads. “He leads me beside still waters ...”.

Yes, the Lamb often led those early disciples beside the still waters of death. Stephen the first martyr, with his last breath, prayed for the very ones stoning him, “Lord, do not charge this sin against them ...”. And

who – despite himself – was the first beneficiary of Stephen’s prayer? Whose life was thereby turned upside down as Simon Peter’s had been before him? Saul of Tarsus, he who had at that very scene **breathed threats and murder** against the disciples. Saul, who was to become the foremost champion of the Nazarene. What changed Saul the persecutor into Paul the apostle? Might it have something to do with the lamblike death of Stephen – the pride-crushing compassion in his plea “Lord, do not charge this sin against them”? Who was it that remembered Stephen’s “face as the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15)? Did Stephen’s eyes meet Saul’s as he prayed? A mild answer can break a bone. The Lord was preparing Saul to be the most broken of men. A

chapter later, the Lord crushed that man in the dust of the Damascus road. And Saul heard the Spirit who dwelt in Stephen again: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me? It is **hard for you** ...”. Would not such gentle words cause the sword to drop from your hand?

Think of James and John, nicknamed ‘**sons of thunder**’ by the Lord. So indignant were they when the Samaritans rejected their Master that they asked Him whether they should call fire down from heaven to devour these enemies. What did Christ reply? “You know not what spirit you are of”. The spirit of Elijah was not the Spirit of Christ. James and John understood what He meant only after the cross. James became the first martyr among the 12. And John – irony of ironies – became the “apostle



**Emperor Domitian – likely the ‘beast’ of Revelation. Would the church survive with the ‘beast’ at the centre of its vision?**

of LOVE”!

Yet the ‘apostle of love’, according to tradition, wrote that most wrath-full of all NT books, the REVELATION. When you think of this book, what comes first to mind? For millions it is boils and blood, beasts and Babylon the Great. Isn’t this book FULL of that very ‘**fire from heaven**’ which the sons of thunder would have visited upon their enemies? Even the early church had a problem reconciling the Revelation with the character of the ‘apostle of love’ and his Master. But what is the true character of this book which so many Christians avoid and so many abuse?

Think first upon the **purpose** of the Revelation, “to show His servants the things which must shortly take place”. It is about 96 AD. Many Christians are suffering at the hands of both Jewish and Gentile authorities. What will be their response? They need first to know which authority is REALLY in control of the future.

So in Revelation’s first great vision of the saved, it is “Lamb in the centre of the throne” (7:17). Note NOT Christ, NOT the Word, not even the LORD! This is the shocking answer to those ultimate questions: What is the meaning of suffering? The meaning of anything? The prevalent belief at the time was that Caesar was Lord of the universe, god in the flesh – though this book describes him as “the beast”, not even human from the divine standpoint! But a LAMB – a slaughtered Lamb at that – ruler of the universe, “in the centre of the throne”?! This was **ludicrous** to both Jew and Gentile. But at the cross “has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world” (1 Cor. 1:20)?

What gave thousands of these early believers the strength to refuse Caesar his divine tribute? Could you carry your children into the arena, into the faces of famished lions? John’s message to these crushed lambs was that the Lion of the tribe of Judah had conquered. They now must go silently after the Lamb. The Lion who is a Lamb IS on the throne. Our God is a god of paradox.

The Revelation is written to 7 actual churches. The most lamb-like of these 7 was the church in Smyrna. They receive the shortest letter, sweet but with a bitter aftertaste. Here the Lord is the Poet of paradox. He introduces Himself as the “one who was dead, but came to life”. He tells them that they, though in poverty, are rich. He urges them to “be

faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”. Their cross would become a crown. The faith of the Smyrnans was **a precious fragrance before God**. Why? The Smyrnans were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice – even to be martyrs – for their Lord.

But the faith of the Smyrnans was not the possession of all. Just down the highway was **Laodicea**. The Lamb was not at the centre of the throne in Laodicea. Indeed He was not even allowed through the door. “Behold I stand at the door and knock”, is the Lamb’s gentle approach to the Laodiceans, who would keep Christ at a safe distance befitting a lion. Laodicea, unlike Smyrna, had no problem with poverty. But even so Christ tells them they were “miserable & poor & blind & naked”. They were rich – but wretched in the eyes of Christ. They were like lukewarm water, fit for nothing but spitting out. But for now He still stood at the door. Here is one of the questions never answered by Revelation – we do not know if the Laodiceans ever opened the door.

The church in Laodicea proved there was an **enemy even deadlier** than “the beast”. More deadly because more subtle. BABYLON the Great, Revelation tells us, killed most of her victims, not by SWORD but by SEDUCTION. Her weapons were the desires of the flesh. If physical death or the threat thereof destroyed 1000s, love of luxury, pleasure & ease proved fatal to millions. Babylon’s weapons were more final than those wielded by “the beast”. Babylon’s delicious but deadly draft, as we glimpse her near her end, is “a golden cup full of abominations and fornications”. Idolatry and compromise. The “beast” could kill the body, Babylon drowned the soul – one sip at a time. Let us **remember Laodicea** – rich yet wretched, blind though seeing, dead while alive.

There are some **26 titles** for Christ in Revelation. He is described as the **Lamb** 28 times – far more than any other title, even Jesus or Christ. These are no mere statistics in these days of militant Islam & crusading Christianity. We must meditate at length on just what “LAMB at the centre” means. For 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians, unlike Constantine’s 4<sup>th</sup> century variety, “Lamb at the centre” was, like the cross itself, a sign of suffering, not worldly conquest. How was Christ’s kingdom to come? Not by regime change, but by a more radical agenda – “love your enemies”, the Lamb’s pre-emptive strike at all active and would-be persecutors. Such an unprecedented weapon broke Saul and turned him into Paul. The Sun of righteousness ultimately would even melt the

stone heart of Rome. Why do we not try Christ's own preferred weapon more often?

"Our weapons are not fleshly", Paul says, "but powerful for overturning fortresses". The Great City fell before the Lamb. But most men today live not in the light of the **Lamb's eternal city**. For the martyr-witnesses of Revelation, the Eternal City was not Rome, but the heavenly Zion. They lived there by faith, among the faithful dead and heavenly armies.

The Heavenly Jerusalem – "its lamp is the Lamb" (21:23). Why does the world not see its light? Are you thinking right now of loved ones who cannot, nay WILL not, see the glory of God in the face of Christ? The heavens declare the glory of God, but we have hidden the glory behind the neon night of our own cities. We are busy building our own foredoomed Babels even while the Heavenly Zion opens her gates to the last martyrs. Men are intoxicated by Babylon's seductive promises. The **worship of power** gave us Caesar's cult. We are not free from Caesar yet. Empires are expanding insidiously around us. The few will always enslave the many. How are the many to live with their slavery? The **pursuit of pleasure** is Babylon's bestselling sedative still. But it is not Caesar who rules, nor Babylon who offers ultimate happiness. It is the Lamb who rules. **Not by legions, but LOVE. Not by sword, but SACRIFICE.** The Lord may not ask us to die for Him – but he asks all of us to live for Him. On that day let us not be found secure inside, feasting with the Laodiceans, while the Lamb waits outside, a door ornament to our 'Christian' edifice.

Let us pray that we may see the Lamb on the throne. Lamb of God, Good Shepherd, occupy the centre of our vision, rule without rival in our hearts. Lead us not into crusades to crush the infidels, but into green pastures, even beside still waters. Prince of Peace, lead us even now into the Heavenly Zion prepared for all those who love your appearing. Amen.