



# **Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation**

*Michael J. Gorman*

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## **Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation** Michael J. Gorman

Reading Revelation Responsibly is for those who are confused by, afraid of, and/or preoccupied with the book of Revelation. In rescuing the Apocalypse from those who either completely misinterpret it or completely ignore it, Michael Gorman has given us both a guide to reading Revelation in a responsible way and a theological engagement with the text itself. He takes interpreting the book as a serious and sacred responsibility, believing how one reads, teaches, and preaches Revelation can have a powerful impact on one's own—and other people's—well-being. Gorman pays careful attention to the book's original historical and literary contexts, its connections to the rest of Scripture, its relationship to Christian doctrine and practice, and its potential to help or harm people in their life of faith. Rather than a script for the end times, Gorman demonstrates how Revelation is a script for Christian worship, witness, and mission that runs counter to culturally embedded civil religion.

"With an exceptional blend of scholarly insight and confessional grounding, this book restores Revelation to relevance for the mission of the church. Gorman joins John of Patmos to inspire us with a risky and lofty vision of following the Lamb in radical and nonviolent witness in the world. This accessible volume is a theological wellspring for preachers, teachers, and any disciples seeking a reliable alternative to the scare-mongering eschatology that clogs airwaves and bookstores."

--J. Nelson Kraybill

author of *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation*

"Sometimes I think there are only two kinds of Christians in America: those who've never read Revelation and those who read almost nothing else. This book can help either kind. With careful use of scholarship and an evident love for the Lamb who was slain, Michael Gorman demystifies a book that's meant to clarify what's at stake when we say, 'Jesus is Lord.'"

--Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

author of *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*

Michael J. Gorman is Professor of Sacred Scripture and Dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary & University in Baltimore, Maryland. His recent books include *Reading Paul* (Cascade 2008) and *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* (2009).

## **Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation Details**

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# **From Reader Review Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation for online ebook**

**Bohuslav Wojnar says**

Very good and well written book.

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**Mary Fisher says**

Currently working through about 8 books on Revelation

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**Chuck says**

Gorman does an admirable job of exposing irresponsible readings of Revelation while providing an insightful lens through which to seek to read it responsibly. This is not a commentary on Revelation, it's a reader's guide. It details a helpful approach to reading, a sensible structure for Revelation and enough insight to the interpretive rules to actually excite someone about reading Revelation.

However--if you are unwilling to have your loyalties and biases to our American citizenship challenged, you should avoid this book. Gorman makes a strong case for any approach to religion that elevates the civil process/status above Kingdom. He makes it very clear that for many American Christians, we are potentially violating the very same principles that caused early Christians to stumble into unfaithfulness. So, I highly recommend reading this. Do so with an open mind.

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**Rick McGarry says**

Reading *Reading Revelation Responsibly* Responsibly

Michael J. Gorman reads Revelation with one eye on the history of its interpretation, one eye on the rest of the Bible, and one eye on contemporaneous literature and culture. It think that having three eyes gives him a big advantage over other interpreters. In his book *Reading Revelation Responsibly* he discusses the form, substance and interpretation of Revelation before reviewing its contents.

Regarding form, Gorman agrees with most scholars that Revelation is an apocalypse, a prophecy and a letter. In addition he finds liturgical and political elements. This is typical of his approach, respecting tradition as well as the history of interpretation, while also building on them. Gorman finds little evidence that John wrote a future history of the end of the world, of the sort that would be amenable to timelines and charts. He has little use for popular dispensationalism.

As a theopetical text, Revelation criticizes and parodies the Roman empire and emperor worship. This

section includes a lengthy discussion and scathing indictment of American Civil Religion.

In chapter four Gorman discusses five interpretative strategies. Predictive strategies use the document like a crystal ball to look into the future. Preterist approaches focus on the historical meaning of the document for the people to whom it was written. Poetic approaches spiritualize or allegorize the text to find moral or philosophical meaning. Political interpreters use the document to comfort oppressed people. The pastoral-prophetic approach seems to focus on the ways the events described in Revelation are always happening, and the lessons it contains for all of God's people throughout time and space. Gorman combines the poetic, political and pastoral approaches in his own reading of the document. This chapter also includes an analysis of interpretive, theological, spiritual and political problems with popular dispensationalism, or the "Left Behind" approach. Gorman counters with seven theological themes including God's reign, the evil empire, idolatry and immorality, faithfulness and resistance, worship, faithful witness, and God's new creation. He also lays out five advantages to interpreting Revelation through the lens of cruciformity.

Chapters five through nine survey the contents of Revelation: Messages to the seven churches, worship in God's throne room, visions of God's judgment, and God's new creation. The author explores each of these sections through the lens of cruciformity, placing the slaughtered lamb at the center of the apocalyptic maelstrom. He looks for the first century author's intent as he communicates to his first century audience. "Revelation is image, metaphor, poetry, political cartooning." (page 78) This leads Gorman to expound on the themes of public worship, discipleship, and hope.

Gorman's book can be helpful for understanding and explaining the blood and violence in Revelation. Gorman's approach maximizes the value of the book for all believers in all times and places, and not just for those who happen to be alive on this earth when the world is ending. He is also, of course, correct and helpful when he insists that we use appropriate categories when we interact with the bible. Revelation is no more a narrative of future history than Romans is a systematic theology, or the gospels are biographies. For these reasons, this book was helpful to me. In short, preachers who accept Gorman's view of Revelation will be better equipped to preach sermons from Revelation that are genuinely beneficial to their congregations, instead of putting on some kind of carnival side show.

Gorman's pacifism, on the other hand, was a huge stumbling block for me. I feel like if he would have laid it out and defined it fairly early on, I would have been much more able to concentrate on his arguments. Instead I was distracted throughout by his casual references, and the way that he assumed the position instead of explaining or describing it.

It is a little unclear to me how anyone reads the Bible and studies history and concludes that the Kingdom of God is being established independently of military conquests and political machinations. The destruction, death and bloodshed in the prophetic and historic books from which John draws his material is all too often literal. I just cannot imagine how Jesus could represent Jehovah and also bring a message of immediate unilateral disarmament.

Pacifism is a dangerous idea, although it is not usually that costly in countries that are ruled by law, have competent militaries and law enforcement, and provide a functional 911 service. Would there be any Amish people left if their communities were located in Somalia or Yemen?

My other criticism is that Gorman's ideas about Christian engagement in culture seem like they could lead us back to the bad old days of private pietism, where involvement in politics, entertainment, or even business was frowned upon. Cruciformity seems to devalue "worldly" strategies or even tactics, suggesting that if we just make sacrifices for each other God's kingdom will eventually arrive, especially if a lot of people

continue to suffer. Cruciformity seems to suggest that we can't really do much about injustice or poverty until the powers and authorities of the air are dethroned. I cannot see any reason why this must be so, historically or biblically.

Nevertheless, Gorman has helped me read Revelation more responsibly, make sense of some confusing issues, and articulate a little more clearly some of my own ideas.

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### **Steve Watson says**

Most people don't read this book very much, and the ones who read it a lot have done some pretty screwy stuff with it. But Gorman argues that this last book of the Bible could also be the first book for followers of Jesus, if read most helpfully. Gorman sharply critiques futurist readings of Revelation that seek to find an encoded but somehow still literal road-map to the future and isn't all that interested in readings that are solely preterist, meaning only interested in first century relevance. Rather, he argues for a reading of Revelation that is poetic, prophetic, and pastoral - evocative of insight about God and society, calling followers of Jesus into allegiance to God against the competing loyalty toward Empire in its many forms, and encouraging hope and faithfulness in the midst of difficult times.

Rather than a detailed commentary, Gorman's excellent review is an introduction to a better way of reading a valuable part of the story of God with us in Jesus.

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### **Norma Malfatti says**

I picked up Reading Revelation Responsibly back in my seminary days for a class on Revelation for three reasons. First, I'd read some of Gorman's other work and really found him to be an easy read (read as not overly full of theological jargon) Second, was the title itself, especially its use of the word "responsibly." I am fascinated with the Book of Revelation and apocalyptic literature. Part of that fascination is not so much its content but the distortion of its content in culture. The Left Behind point of view, which Gorman debunks, just seems so ridiculous to me (and the books, quite frankly made me oscillate between feeling between wanting a crown in heaven and someone who would never, ever be raptured because I haven't done enough to earn being raptured) and so I am always looking for new ways to counter those claims. By the way, I totally do not believe in rapture theology. Jesus Christ died for ALL, not just for some whose discipleship were found worthy enough. Quite frankly, if that were the case, then we'd all out of luck. Finally, I was teaching a class on Revelation at the time and I was hoping it would help me articulate in a more helpful way. It was indeed helpful. In fact it was so helpful that I'm reading it for a third time to help prepare for teaching Revelation yet again.

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### **Adam Marquez says**

Reading Revelation Responsibly was a pleasure. It was clear, concise, and full of helpful perspective. The book is about perspective and not absolute stances on minutia. It provides useful lenses by which we may

enter John's imaginative world, and explore it without the anxiety of being in an unfamiliar place.

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### **Jim says**

For most of my life and ministry career, I have had no idea what to do with the book of Revelation. Using it as a code to be broken or deciphered to try to figure out the future has been the most popular, and vaguely concerning, approach I've seen used by others. It never quite sat well with me. So, not knowing what else to do, I generally ignored Revelation, reading it every other year or so to prove to myself I was committed to the Bible.

Lately, I have had the suspicion that a lot of what I don't understand and see as somewhat suspect within "Western" Christianity can be traced back to, at least in part, this specific type of future predictive reading of Revelation and other sections of the Bible which have been completely ripped out of their own context and pieced together seemingly at random. Such frustrations include an unquestioning support of the state of Israel, a suspicion/villification of any move towards governmental or denominational unity, a tendency to look at any difficulty Christians experience in modern culture as oppression or persecution and more. I felt there must be a healthier and more accurate way of reading and applying the book of Revelation to our lives. Michael J. Gorman's book provides another and, I would say, better way.

Gorman writes that "To read Revelation responsibly...is to read it not as a script for the future but as a script for the church." The book of Revelation, according to Gorman and much of church history, is a call to the church to be faithful witnesses in a potentially hostile culture regardless of the cost to us individually and collectively. It is about resisting the trappings of the culture around us that seem appealing but contain hollow promises that only God can fulfill and satisfy. It is about the victory of the crucified Lamb over the powers of sin and death and the victory then extended to His followers. It is a book of worship and hope. "Revelation is not about the antichrist, but about the living Christ. It is not about a rapture out of this world but about faithful discipleship in this world."

Gorman's book provides a solid way to understand the beautiful and timely message found within the book of Revelation. I would highly recommend this.

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### **Ken says**

Excellent book on Revelation. There are so many misconceptions about Revelation and so much shoddy interpretation. No wonder people avoid the book. I found Gorman's book refreshing and challenging and very helpful as I prepare to preach a series on Revelation.

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### **Terra says**

I have really appreciated Gorman's approach and think it would make a great, accessible book for a small group study. One thing that stood out for me as I read Gorman was the extent to which Revelation is a liturgical text (p. 34-35). I admit I had forgotten about how full of wholehearted worship it is. The Lord God "who was and is and is to come" and so many other expressions of praise and honor toward God are found within (Revelation 4:8). There are so many passages that I can't read without joyful tears coming to my

eyes—there is such clear rightness and beauty in them. As Gorman notes, the texts are “most likely drawn from early Christian hymns and identified as the music of heaven” (p. 34). Here is a way in which Revelation has something in common with Psalms in addition to Ezekiel and Daniel.

The other thing that stands out is what God is up to in the church and the world. Christ comes again as victorious warrior but his victory does not happen like the world’s victory would. In fact, he succeeds precisely by opposing that way. Gorman rightly points out the significance of the “slaughtered Lamb” imagery of Christ is in its emphasis on sacrifice as well as “vulnerability” (p. 121). Those are frankly not the kinds of strategies I want to use. But it is way of Christ. Our tools don’t mimic the world’s tools. Against this, the ways that patriotism/nationalism have a way of getting insidiously wrapped up with religion ring particularly loudly and with rightful warning and caution for the US right now. God is making all things new and we are called to participate in that kingdom work. And the point of it all is a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation gathered in worship. As Gorman writes, the “beautiful vision [of Revelation 7:9] is...at the heart of the church’s self-understanding. This is what God is up to in the world.” (p. 133). Amen and amen.

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## **Tristan Sherwin says**

With clarity and conviction, Michael J. Gorman offers a better framework for reading Revelation; a counter-framework to the popular “Rapture” ideas perpetuated by the Hal Lindsey’s tracts and Tim LaHaye’s *\*Left Behind\** series that have spilled over and stained a large host of Christian (and non-Christian) mind-sets.

Although there are a few paragraphs within the book dedicated to demonstrating the many problems with (and caused) by the ideas of a Left Behind style “Rapture theology”, the main thrust of *\*Reading Revelation Responsibly\** is not to criticise but to lay-down a more solid ground-work for understanding and applying the message of this complex piece of writing.

Gorman illustrates that Revelation should be read as a Theopoetic, Theopolitical and Pastoral-Prophetic text calling the church to be faithful to the “Lamb-Power” way of God in contrast to colluding with the way of Empire (Rome, Babylon or any other sacralised human power-house). That is, to paraphrase Gorman, instead of reading Revelation as a chronological coded-script about future events it should be read as a spiralling (repeating) script to the church, a call to faithful witness in following the Lamb into the renewal of all creation.

I should mention here that this is not a commentary to Revelation, even though the grand narrative and theme of the book (along with a good number of it’s more well-known and misunderstood scenes) are looked at closely. But what Gorman offers through his key chapters provides a better theological, literary, and historical lens in which to view this heavily symbolic text through. This I feel is important, as it’s the understanding that we bring to the text that dictates how we read it--and it is this which needs to be challenged and reshaped. For me, those key chapters are as follows;

2. What Are We Reading? The Form of Revelation
3. What Are We Reading? The Substance of Revelation
4. How Do We Read It? Interpreting Revelation
7. Conflict and Characters: The Drama of Revelation



Through the lens of these chapters, Gorman, within the remaining chapters, enables us to glimpse the text of Revelation through first century vision; seeing it's politically loaded symbols and their referents in their original context, before drawing its relevance back into the present.

And Gorman is not on his own as he does this. *Reading Revelation Responsibly* draws heavily on other biblical texts, and scholars such as Eugene Peterson, Richard Bauckham, N. T. Wright and Barbara Rossing (to name a few). There's also a good bibliography offering plenty of further reading.

In particular, I enjoyed Gorman's consistent reminder that God is "Lamb like" and God's way is the "Lamb's Way", a cruciform God, who has already won the victory through his death and resurrection. Thus, the vision of Christ which is presented in Revelation is not at odds with the suffering servant presented in the gospels. As such, aligning and nuancing the theopolitical critique of Revelation, the way in which God rules and conquers is the antithesis of the way of Empire; the blood that soaks the white riders cloak is his own sacrificial blood, not his enemies; and justice is brought with the sword from his mouth (his word), not through wielding a sword in his hand with a militaristic agenda. With this in mind, Gorman does an excellent job of helping us to de-literalise the violent passages of Revelation, seeing their symbolic significance as judgement (empire's judgement of itself) and justice (the self-exhaustion of evil and the prevailing of God's flourishing intent for creation).

Personally, I feel this book is profound, well written and essential reading for returning to a more biblical way of understanding this remarkable and beautiful piece of writing.

-Tristan Sherwin, author of *\*Love: Expressed\**

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## **Paul Batz says**

This is one of the best books I've read on the book of Revelation. It is not a commentary. Rather, it is an excellent primer for those hoping to make a first contact with this book or hoping to have some erroneous views corrected. Gorman is keenly aware of the variety of interpretive traditions and works carefully through each, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. He is familiar with all the major interpreters of Revelation and utilizes a wealth of scholarship, including references to major voices in Christian tradition. He is highly critical of rapture theology, millennialism, and dispensationalism; his reasons for being so are convincing. This is a book that gives hope to those wondering what to do with popular understandings of Revelation, clearing the path for a faithful way forward.

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## **Robert Dorough, Jr. says**

Michael J. Gorman's *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb Into the New Creation* proposes exactly that: read Revelation well (stop taking symbols literally), worship and be a witness of the Lord (not governments, and be especially mindful of those that co-opt Christianity and claim to be the mighty savior), and follow the Lamb (imitate him by being nonviolent and sacrificial—lay down your life, don't take others') into the New Creation (there *will be* a new creation!). "Yes" on all fronts!

Gorman briefly describes several ways people read and interpret the last book in our canon, noting some of the problems that arise and unhealthy conclusions thereby taken from the text. He helpfully explains not only what we know of apocalyptic writing, but that the book of Revelation is actually a collection of genres: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter, as well as being both liturgical and political. There's a lot going on here, and it cannot be simplified into one narrow way of interpreting the entire text—certainly not a literal approach (e.g., 1,000 years *does not* mean a literal 1,000 years). We are reminded that the sacrificial Lamb is the central image of the drama, and that when the Lord comes with sword in mouth (not in hand!) his robes are already bloodied—his own blood from already conquering evil through sacrificing himself!

Revelation is about worshiping the true Lord and living that out (discipleship). It's not *all* about either what was (the Roman empire) or will be (a blueprint for the "end times"), but encouragement for us *in* the end times (between Jesus' ascension and future return) while we live as witnesses of the Lord. Empires will rise and fall, but freedom, salvation, and truth are in Lamb!

I highly recommend this one. It may be particularly helpful for those who currently find themselves in the hermeneutical camp of *dispensationalism*.

Aside: I read the book in Kindle format, which has no page numbers and is sometimes a bit clunky in the formatting.

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### **Marc Arlt says**

#### **Good assessment of Empire, but missed the Jewish part of the story.**

I think this book does a fantastic job of exegeting Revelation through the lens of Empire, but it fails to recognize the element of covenantal judgement directed towards those living faithlessly under the old covenant (Matthew 24). An important read as it does a good job of Empire and offers a valid perspective from this angle. Read this book.

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### **Dan Boyce says**

This is an excellent study of the book of Revelation. If you have read Revelation and want to explore the powerful dynamic of the most exciting book, I recommend Michael J. Gorman to you.

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