

Revelation in Context

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A Supplement for *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

The 2010–2011 *Horizons* Bible Study by Barbara R. Rossing

Introduction

Revelation Revealed

In 2006, a Presbyterian Panel survey showed that most Presbyterians read or hear scripture once a week: in Sunday worship services. Since only two short passages from the book of *Revelation* appear in the preaching lectionary, it's a safe bet that many of us have had less exposure to it than to other parts of the Bible. If you're in this group, you may be unsure how to approach the book, especially since *Revelation* is, in many ways, unlike any other book of the Bible. It takes some preparation to see how it fits into the whole picture of God's love and judgment of humankind. To understand it requires a bit of theological grounding.

But don't let the word *theology* scare you. You already are a theologian. Any time you reflect on what God is like and how you relate to God, or study God's Word, you are thinking theologically.

To stretch your theological horizons, though, accurate information is essential. A quick look at four key concepts related to understanding *Revelation* will help. These are the topics that most often challenge readers of *Revelation*. They are difficult indeed, but as children of God and people who are passionate about understanding scripture, we can embrace the opportunity to explore these topics, both individually and in our communities. These four topics each are examined in separate lessons on the following pages.

- Lesson 1: Eschatology (*es-cah-to-lo-gee*) 3
- Lesson 2: The Idea of the Rapture 7
- Lesson 3: Violence in *Revelation* 11
- Lesson 4: A Vulnerable God 14

Please note: None of the information provided is an attempt to change your personal beliefs or to project a specific worldview. Rather, the hope is that through these exercises, you will pick up some facts that will lead you to ask more questions, and grow more deeply in your “apocalyptic journey” through the wonderful book of *Revelation*. In the section called “Think It Through,” toward the end of each lesson, various exercises will help you explore what these difficult topics mean, both in scripture and in life experiences. To help discern how to respond to those exercises, check out the “Dig Deeper” resources listed at the end of each lesson, as well as additional resources available on the *Horizons* Bible study website, www.pcusa.org/horizons.

How to Get Started

Have your Bible handy—the New Revised Standard Version is used most often in the *Revelation* study, so it might help to have that particular translation. As with any study of scripture, it helps to read the passage directly—as John of Patmos suggests, aloud—and surround your reading with prayer. This is especially

true for *Revelation*. Because the imagery of the book can be overpowering, we should try to read *Revelation* in its context—as one part of the entire canon of scripture—not as some sort of summary or “Cliffs-Notes for Christianity.” God is revealed to us in all of scripture—not just one book.

I once heard Marion Soards, professor of New Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, say that scripture is akin to a chorale in which

different voices blend together to make a beautiful song. Occasionally, one of the singers may sound a bit flat or a tad off key. This doesn’t change the song or negate the beauty of the whole.

If you can read *Revelation* this way—not as a solo piece but as one part of a beautiful chorale that sings to us of God’s love and judgment—your faith will be enriched as a result.

Think It Through

1. What did you like to read when you were growing up: biographies, true-life stories, adventure tales, or folk and fairy tales, mythologies, poetry? How might these preferences make a difference to the way you read *Revelation* now?
2. Do you find yourself “thinking theologically” sometimes? If so, what usually triggers it: a happy event, a personal loss, a beautiful scene, an unjust situation, a fragrant scent, or . . . ? Spend some time contemplating these triggers.
3. Look again at the four topics that will be covered in the following exercises. Make a note of something you know and something you don’t know about each one. At the end of this four-part study, check your notes to see what has changed.
4. To Dr. Soards, the Bible is one song sung by many singers. Complete the following sentence: “To me, *Revelation* is . . .” Think of instances where one part belongs to many, such as one bead on a 66-bead necklace, or one routine in a dance program, or one column in a sudoku puzzle, etc. How do these analogies help in your understanding of the role of *Revelation* in God’s Word?

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Lesson One

Eschatology: Forecasting the Future

How Will It All End?

Eschatology (*es-cah-tol-o-gee*) is the term scholars use when they talk about the end of time. The word comes from the Greek word *eschaton*, or “last.” For Christians, it refers to the return of Christ and “a new heaven and a new earth” (*Rev. 21:1*). Presbyterians and others within the Reformed tradition strongly affirm this belief, but we don’t claim that we know *how* it will happen.

Writing in the series “What Presbyterians Believe,” published by *Presbyterians Today*, W. Eugene March says that, while “Presbyterians have clear teaching and strong conviction about the end of the world,” we also have an equally clear understanding that only God knows how the end will play out.¹ Even Jesus warned us that we shouldn’t speculate about details or timing (*Mt. 24:36*).

But, even if we ought not to speculate about specific events relating to the *eschaton*, we *should* think about it as a whole. As Christians, one of the most precious gifts we possess comes directly from the *eschaton*—we have hope for the redemption of all creation, including humanity. Christianity always looks forward to a time when God’s promises are completely fulfilled and all of creation acknowledges that God is “all in all” (*1 Cor. 15:28*).

End or Beginning?

Though there are many ways to think about the *eschaton*, most of these viewpoints can be categorized in ways that may be familiar to many Christians in the United States—**amillennialism**, **postmillennialism**, and **premillennialism**. The millennium refers to the 1,000-year reign of Christ mentioned in *Revelation 20:4*. Generally, many Christians agree that the millennium is the reign of God on earth, but we often disagree about how to interpret the term and how it relates to Christ’s return.

Amillennialism holds that the 1,000-year reign of Christ is not to be taken literally. The amillennial approach affirms that this broken, sinful world will be changed into a world that reflects the promises of God when Christ returns. It will be a glorious event, followed by a general resurrection and transformation of believers as well as redemption of all creation.² The image of the 1,000-year reign found in *Revelation 20:4* is intended to convey the eternal reign of Christ. John Calvin is counted among the influential amillennialists of history. For amillennialists, the book of *Revelation* is not to be read literally; rather, it is to be read as an apocalyptic vision of hope for churches living in times of tension and in conflict with current culture. This apocalyptic vision remains relevant for *all* readers of *Revelation*—whether in the late first century or the early twenty-first century.

The **postmillennial** approach also holds that the 1,000-year reign of Christ is not literally 1,000 years, and that the events described in the book of *Revelation* are not to be read literally. Those who align with the postmillennial approach believe that the reign of Christ already is under way—it began with his death and resurrection, and has continued ever since. Even now, the reign of God is being revealed in this world. The general idea of postmillennialism is that the progression of creation and humanity since the resurrection of Christ is leading into a “golden age” in which the world described by the Hebrew prophets will become a reality.³ Christian preaching and teaching eventually will win over the world, and this will usher in the reign of God on earth.

Premillennialism holds that Christ will return to earth *prior* to a literal 1,000-year reign over the earth. This 1,000-year reign will be shared with “the saints,” who reign with Christ until a final rebellion precipitates the battle in which Satan and his minions are banished eternally to the lake of fire.⁴ At this point, the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven as the eternal home of the faithful.⁵ Premillennialists tend

to interpret all of *Revelation* in a literal way, seeing the events described by John as predictions of events yet to occur.

Premillennial dispensationalism is a popular and currently influential branch of this view. Premillennialism has roots in early Christianity, but dispensationalism is much more modern. Its roots can be traced to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writings of John Nelson Darby and Cyrus Scofield. From their study of the whole Bible, various dispensationalists conceive of three to seven progressive historical periods. In each of these, God offers salvation to humankind in a different way.

The seventh, and final, dispensation will be the “rapture” of the church from this world, prior to a time of tribulation during which the antichrist will rise to power, and the final, world-ending battle of Armageddon will take place.⁶ Jesus will emerge victorious to rule over the world, which will then be populated only with the faithful. All others will have been destroyed or thrown into the fires of hell. One notable element of this stance is that it requires Christ to return twice—once to “rapture” the church and once to fight the world-ending battle of Armageddon. (Learn more about the rapture in Lesson Three.)

What are we to make of all these viewpoints? Do we find ourselves aligning with one or another? How do we determine what this all means? These are important questions as we consider the message that God has for us through the book of *Revelation*. Though some of these labels may sound foreign or intimidating to us, ideas and beliefs about the end-times are all around us. In order to hear what *scripture* is saying to us, we also need to recognize the presence of eschatological language and ideas in our everyday culture.

A Field Day for the Imagination

The end of the world is an attractive literary device for novelists and screenwriters. Without a doubt, the most popular novels and movies currently dealing with eschatology are those in the *Left Behind* series. *Left Behind* puts forth a particularly dramatic form of premillennial dispensationalism, and, at its peak,

held the top four spots on the *New York Times* best-seller list. But *Left Behind* is not the first of its kind.

In 1970, Hal Lindsay published *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which takes a similarly dramatic view of the end times through a dispensational lens.⁷ Around the same time, Salem Kirban published his novel *666*, which was revised in 1998.⁸ The dramatic telling of the end of the world isn't limited to novels. Stephen King's 1978 Lutheran-tinged end-time novel *The Stand* was made into both a miniseries for television and a comic book.⁹ Many Hollywood movies have taken the idea of the antichrist and woven suspenseful stories (think *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*, *The Seventh Sign*, *The Omega Code*).

The book of *Revelation*, if read strictly literally, provides powerful imagery and the most terrifying villain ever, so it's not surprising that novels and movies using that imagery are successful. In fact, the imagery of *Revelation* has been so seamlessly incorporated into popular culture that few people are confused when someone refers to the “seventh sign of the Apocalypse,” or one of the “four horsemen.”

Yet, eschatology also is part of novels and movies that do not take the dispensational viewpoint. Writer and theologian C. S. Lewis, in his books series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, tells the story of redemption and hope without a world-ending battle.¹⁰ In the first book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a battle is fought, but it is not a battle that ends the world. The real battle is won when the lion, Aslan, willingly offers himself to the White Witch and breaks the “old magic.” Aslan very clearly represents a Christ figure in this story, and so, points readers to the victory of the cross that redeems all creation.

In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Lewis's contemporary, J. R. R. Tolkien, pictures a battle that restores the world to proper balance, removing the forces that would disrupt and destroy it.¹¹ Even the *Harry Potter* novels show us a battle between the forces of good and evil that does not destroy the world, but restores the world.¹² This redemption of creation—a

restoration of God's designation of "good" is at the heart of a Reformed view of the "end times."

So, What Do Presbyterians Expect?

Presbyterians expect a positive ending. Reformed theology—which forms the basis of Presbyterian doctrine—holds to an amillennial position. While we believe that the world is a broken, sinful place, we do *not* believe the world is a hopeless place, only fit for destruction. Just the opposite is true. Our belief in ultimate redemption fundamentally is founded on hope.

When God created the world, God pronounced it good (*Gen. 1:31*). When Noah emerged from the ark, God promised that never again would the earth and the living things on it be destroyed because of the sinful heart of humanity (*Gen. 8:21–22*). Nothing in scripture contradicts or negates this declaration of the goodness of creation or the promise of nondestruction. Rather than forecasting destruction of the world, the rest of the Bible tells the story of God showing love and redemption for sinful humans, which culminates in the ultimate gift—the birth of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. Rather than the end being the destruction of the world, the *eschaton* will usher in a time when all will be as God intended and as the prophets described for all humankind:

In days to come the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills. Peoples shall stream to it, and many nations shall come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (*Micah 4:1–2*).

Thy Kingdom Come . . .

The apostle Paul was also concerned with end times. Many of his letters to the churches he founded and loved centered on the return of Christ and the future reign of God. Throughout Paul's letters to these churches, we find that Paul viewed the realm of God as being both present already and yet to be revealed. Though not directly in scripture, this notion has been identified by many theologians as "the already and the not yet."

While this phrase may be familiar, it often takes reading large portions of Paul's letters to grasp its full meaning. Essentially, Paul is saying that the fulfillment of God's promises and the completion of God's kingdom were begun in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but won't be fully complete until Christ returns. Something *has* happened in Christ, yet the redemptive work of God is not yet complete.¹³ Paul describes our salvation as a betrothal of marriage—all will be fully consummated at the marriage celebration (*Eph. 5:25–27*). Thus, *something* (the life, death and resurrection of Jesus) has happened *already*, but the *completion* (the complete arrival of the reign of God) has *not* happened yet.

The coming reign of God means the redemption of all things (*Rom. 8:19–25*), the completion of our salvation, the reason we have hope in Christ. The eschatological promise of God is this: the way things are now is not the way things ultimately will be.

A Hope-Filled Future

Unfortunately it is all too common to hear the word *eschatology* and immediately think of world-ending wars and reasons to fear. But eschatology is an *uncommon* aspect of our faith, a constantly looking forward to the things we are assured will happen, even if we are not assured that we will see them. "So we do not lose heart," as the apostle Paul said (*2 Cor. 4:16*), since, as Christians, we can see the eternal reality that can only be perceived through the eyes of faith and hope.

Think It Through

1. Amillennial, postmillennial, premillennial: match each of these theories with one of the three sentences below.
 - The book of *Revelation* tells us exactly how and when God will reward the faithful and punish evildoers.
 - The book of *Revelation* shows that Christ's 1000-year reign already is under way.
 - The book of *Revelation* was written to encourage Christians to be faithful in difficult times.
2. If you were to make a crayon drawing of an image from the book of *Revelation*, what would you choose? A battle scene? Angel wings? A fearsome monster? A sparkling sea? What draws you to that particular image?
3. Look back at the books named in this lesson. Which ones have you read? What did you like/dislike about them? Ask your friends which ones they read and remember, and talk about how such books might have influenced your view of the *eschaton*.
4. Presbyterians hold a positive view of the future. In your own words, briefly explain what we believe that gives us hope, or express your own hope in a short poem.

Dig Deeper

Here are some suggestions for reading and reflection

Websites

- www.pcusa.org/today/archive/believe/wpb9901.htm
- www.pcusa.org/today/archive/believe/wpb9406.htm
- www.pcusa.org/today/archive/believe/wpb9901b.htm

Books

Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World by Shirley Guthrie (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary by Steve Gregg (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation by Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993) (also available in DVD from www.cokesbury.com).

Christian America and the Kingdom of God by Richard T. Hughes (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 2009).

Theology of the Apostle Paul by James D. G. Dunn (a great explanation of Paul's "already-not yet" eschatology) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

Notes

1. Eugene March, "The End of the World," in *Presbyterians Today* (January 1999). Online at www.pcusa.org/today/archive/believe/wpb9901.htm.
2. Robert G. Clouse, Robert N. Hosack, Richard V. Pierard, *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bridgepoint Books, 1999), 52.
3. Clouse, 48.
4. Ibid, 46.
5. Ibid, 47.
6. For more information on the "rapture," see Lesson Three of this document.
7. First published by Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
8. Self-published in 1970 by Salem Kirban; revised edition published in 1999.
9. First published in 1989 by Viking Penguin, NY.
10. First published in 1950 by Geoffrey Bles, United Kingdom.
11. First published in 1954–1955 by Allen and Unwin, United Kingdom.
12. J. K. Rowling, first published in 1997 by Bloomsbury in London and Scholastic in New York.
13. James D. G. Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (New York: T & T Clark LTD, 1998), 466.

Lesson Two

The Idea of the Rapture

Rapture: Delight or Disaster?

“The rapture” is an idea that either brings comfort or creates anxiety. If it is truly coming, none of us wants to be “left behind!” For all of its centrality in popular understanding of the end times—especially among those whose faith is centered on staying safe in an increasingly uncertain world—the notion of the rapture is relatively modern.

What Is the Rapture, Anyway?

The idea of the rapture (often called “the rapture of the church”) is most often explained through a reference to a specific verse of scripture. In *1 Thessalonians 4:17*, Paul mentions the “catching up” of believers. Since the word *rapture* comes from “the Latin word *raptio*, a translation of the original Greek for the word ‘caught up’ as it is used in Paul’s First Epistle to the Thessalonians,”¹ many see this verse as having ultimate importance with regards to last things. Premillennial dispensationalists² hold that prior to the rise of the antichrist and the coming tribulation, believers will be taken up to heaven to wait out the events that will unfold on earth, and then will join Jesus as he returns to earth to wage final and victorious battle over the forces of evil.

In *Left Behind*, the first in a series of novels that use fiction to portray the coming events of the last days, one finds a dramatic and imaginative depiction of this notion of rapture. As a 747 jet flies across the country, just before sunrise, seats are suddenly empty, except for clothes, wallets, even surgical pins and joints. On the ground, cars crash into each other. Women giving birth see their newborns disappear from the delivery room, and all over the world people simply disappear without a trace.³

Whose Idea Was It?

The idea of a “rapture” of believers, in which Christ will “snatch up” his own to save them from the coming “tribulation” on earth, dates to the early

nineteenth century, when J. N. Darby, a lawyer turned pastor and teacher, advanced the ideas of dispensationalism, especially in the United States.⁴ The idea is supported by a passage from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians (*1 Thessalonians 4:15–18*). Like Paul, the church in Thessalonika believed that the promised return of Christ was imminent. When Christ ascended to heaven after his resurrection, he promised to come back again. The first churches interpreted Christ’s “I’ll be back” as “I’ll be back really soon.” In fact, some believed that the “day of the Lord” had come and gone (*2 Thes. 2:2*).

One contributing factor to this belief was concern about believers who died before Christ returned, for, if Christ really did promise believers they would see his return, then those who missed it because of death might not share in the promised eternal life. Rather than those who were still alive feeling “left behind,” the concern was actually for those who had gone before—the fear was that they might be “left out.”

Thus, Paul was writing to correct the false idea that the day of Lord had come and gone, and to reassure the Thessalonians that their loved ones who had died before Christ’s return would not be left out. Rather than a promise that believers will be snatched (the Greek verb in *1 Thess. 4:17* means “snatched up”) out of a world gone mad, Paul’s intent is to reassure the faithful that *all* believers will share in the glory of God’s reign, not just those who are alive when Christ returns.

Avoiding Tribulation

Among those who hold to a belief in the rapture, its significance often is connected to a belief that a tribulation will affect the earth prior to the final battle of good and evil and the triumph of God. But like the rapture, the notion of a coming tribulation also is a fairly modern addition to the historical beliefs of Christ’s church.

The Greek word that is translated as “tribulation” in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible occurs 47 times in the New Testament. The notion of “a” tribulation comes mainly from three of those verses: *Matthew 24:21*, *Revelation 3:10*, and *Revelation 7:14*, but there is nothing in the Greek text to indicate that this use of the word is in some way different from the other 44 uses of the word in the New Testament.

In most uses, the word indicates trouble or distress for believers. While the KJV consistently translates the word as “tribulation,” the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is used by most Reformed churches (including Presbyterian), never translates the word as “tribulation.” Rather, the NRSV translates the word as “great suffering” (*Mt. 24:21*), “trial” (*Rev. 3:10*), and “the great ordeal” (*Rev. 7:14*).

Ironically, the notion of the rapture actually allows believers to avoid distress or trouble. Barbara Rossing, in her book *The Rapture Exposed*, describes the rapture as the voyeuristic desire to be above the fray while God administers to the rest of the world just punishment.⁵ While the rest of the world gets what it deserves, believers escape punishment and distress.

Yet nothing in the Bible leads us to believe that the Church or believers will escape suffering.⁶ In fact, much leads us to expect it! (See *Matthew 5:10–11*, for example). The notion of a rapture that will snatch believers away from coming tribulation is a promise of escape that is not borne out by scripture. Instead, if we follow Jesus’ example, we recognize that believers are to turn toward great trouble that opposes the reign of God and move toward it with the truth of God’s love and grace.

Prophecy vs. Prediction

Much of the difference in how Christians read and interpret *Revelation* comes from how they understand prophecy. Ordinarily, most of us think of prophecy as a prediction of the future. This common use is reflected in the order of definitions provided by a popular online dictionary:

1. the foretelling or prediction of what is to come

2. something that is declared by a prophet, especially a divinely inspired prediction, instruction, or exhortation
3. a divinely inspired utterance or revelation: oracular prophecies
4. the action, function, or faculty of a prophet⁷

Since the first definition of a word is often the most-used, prophecy as prediction appears to be the preferred meaning. But the Merriam Webster online dictionary places a different meaning first: “an inspired utterance of a prophet.”⁸ This definition is supported by *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, which identifies a prophet as the “spokesperson” for a deity.⁹

Merriam Webster puts foretelling the future as the last definition. This ordering is more in line with the teachings of the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, and with the description of prophecy in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. These prophets weren’t fortune-tellers. Instead, they brought to the people a message from God, which sometimes (often!) included a word of warning about what could and would happen if they did not change. Isaiah laid out a court case against the people, listing their wrongdoings and warning them that the punishment would fit their crimes (*Is. 1–3*).

Sometimes the prophets brought a word of explanation about why things were the way they were. Speaking to people carried into exile in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah not only lamented the situation, he carried a message of hope and promise (*Jer. 16:15*). The prophet Hosea brought a message of love and grief from God to a people who had strayed, through the metaphor of an unfaithful, yet beloved, wife (*Hos. 3:1*).

Amazingly enough, the message of doom that many prophets carried was not necessarily a “done deal.” Consider Jonah, a reluctant prophet. Jonah was dispatched to Nineveh to warn the Ninevites that they would be destroyed in forty days if they did not repent. To Jonah’s great distress—for Nineveh was not a friendly country—the Ninevites did repent, and God spared them. Though Jonah’s message warned

of coming destruction, embedded in that prophecy, that inspired word, was the hope that disaster could be averted if only the people would hear and act.

So it is with much of the “prophecy” in *Revelation*. Whereas many people read *Revelation* as a guidebook to future (or current) events, this is not consistent with an understanding of prophetic revelation in the whole of scripture.

What Do Presbyterians Think?

Most Presbyterians reject the notion of rapture as put forth by premillennial dispensationalism. First, there’s not much support in scripture for the rapture as described in premillennial dispensational theory or in the *Left Behind* novels. Another, and perhaps more important, reason is that this scenario ultimately means Christ must return twice—once to rapture believers and once to reign in power and glory in the New Jerusalem, which descends from heaven (*Rev. 21:1*).

While *1 Thessalonians 4:16–17* often is cited in support of the rapture, Paul tells the Thessalonian church that Christ will return only once—in order to complete the victory over death promised by Jesus’ resurrection (*1 Thes. 4:13–18*).¹⁰ Paul means these words to be comforting rather than threatening, and there’s no indication that there’s a threat of being “left behind.”

In his short and readable book *Left Behind or Left Befuddled?*, Gordon L. Isaac takes the authors of the *Left Behind* series to task for putting more into Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians than can be found in the text. Isaac argues that in this letter, Paul is talking less about the resurrection of believers than about the resurrection of Christ—an argument that makes sense in light of Paul’s other writings, both to Thessalonika and to other churches he established.

As early as 1944, Presbyterians rejected the arguments of dispensationalism, including the notion of rapture.¹¹ Dispensationalism asserts that there have been seven distinct dispensations of God’s grace, or seven ways in which God has offered salvation to humanity. Reformed theologians, including Presbyterians, believe there is only one way to salvation—God’s covenant of grace through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ’s life, death and resurrection lead to salvation for all the world—God does not “dispense” salvation through other modes.

Warning and Promise

If we view *Revelation* as both warning and promise, like the prophecies of the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, the need for a rapture to snatch us out of the world becomes less appealing. Like Jeremiah and Isaiah and the writer of many of the psalms, isn’t it more exciting to stick around and see the wonders God can do, rather than hope for escape because things are beyond God’s ability to fix?

Think It Through

1. Think back to a difficult task you had to complete as a child (homework, cleaning your room, saying you are sorry, etc.). What adult guidance worked best for you: threats, promises, warnings, logical consequences, rewards, or other methods? Think about why these methods were effective and how that might influence the way you read *Revelation*.
2. Both John the Baptist and Jesus brought inspired, prophetic words from God to the people. In your Bible, compare John’s message of repentance (*Lk. 3:1–18*) with Jesus’ message in the Sermon on the Mount (*Mt. 5:1–30*). Write a **W** next to any warnings you find and a **P** beside any promises.
3. Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians were concerned with the return of Christ, and his words in *1 Thessalonians 4:15–18* often are used to argue for a coming rapture of believers. Read the entire chapter, then answer the following questions:

- a) What lifestyle best prepares Christians for Christ's imminent return?
 - b) How does Paul comfort believers whose loved ones have already died?
 - c) Do you find the drama of Christ's return a joyful or a fearful event? Why so?
 - d) How does our future expectation as Christians color our reading of present reality?
4. Do you agree with Barbara Rossing that the rapture is an escapist theology that can lead to Christians taking no responsibility for changing this world? Why or why not? How does this relate to Paul's words to the Thessalonians in *2 Thessalonians 3:6-9*?
 5. Start making a list of the new terms you are learning in this study of the book of *Revelation*. By the end of all four lessons, you should have enough to make an interesting word search or crossword puzzle. Send your finished work to ashley.meyer@pcusa.org, and it may become a resource for other PW Bible students.

Dig Deeper

Here are some suggestions for reading and reflection

- *Prophets*, a PowerPoint presentation from Donald Penny, religion professor at Campbell University, a church-affiliated university in North Carolina. This presentation has a good overview of prophecy and prophets: www.campbell.edu/faculty/penny/rel125/Topic%205%20Prophets.ppt.
- Timothy B. Weber, "On the Road to Armageddon," an excerpt on belief.net from his book *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Ada, MI: Baker, 2004), excerpt accessible at www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/End-Times/On-The-Road-To-Armageddon.aspx.
- Gordon L. Isaac, *Left Behind or Left Befuddled: The Subtle Dangers of Popularizing the End Time* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).
- Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

Notes

1. Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 22.
2. Go to Lesson One of this document to review the beliefs of premillennial dispensationalism.
3. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), 6.
4. Isaac, 38.
5. Much of the first chapters of *Left Behind: A Novel* include a description of the effects of the rapture—the actual event is not described.
6. Gordon Isaac, *Left Behind or Left Befuddled* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 67.
7. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/prophecy>, accessed March 15, 2010.
8. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prophecy, accessed March 15, 2010.
9. David Noel Freedman, editor, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 496.
10. Isaac, 56.
11. See the document "Report on Dispensationalism," which is part of the "What We Believe" article on eschatology at www.pcusa.org/today/archive/believe/wpb9901h.htm.

Lesson Three

Violence in *Revelation*

Take That! And That!

Many people are repulsed by the violent imagery in *Revelation*. At the time John was writing, the Roman Empire controlled the entire area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. The empire's rulers maintained control both by military might and by bringing the Roman way of life to the areas they conquered. *Pax Romana*, the "peace of Rome," refers to the time when the lands conquered and ruled by Rome were relatively free from internal conflict.

However, this *Pax Romana*, this freedom from conflict, was brought about by brutal means. The Romans had inventive ways of punishing those who threatened the *Pax Romana*—crucifixion was just one of them. Violence was a part of everyday life in the Roman Empire, and the people to whom John was writing would have been intimately familiar with this.

Untangling the Apocalypse

Much like the cultural environment in which it was written, *Revelation* is full of violent and dramatic scenes—bloodshed on an epic level, battles between supernatural beings, a child being snatched from a woman in birth—these are just some of the horrifying images of *Revelation*. What is essential to know and remember when reading this language, though, is that the violence described is *not* to be considered a list of events that have yet to occur. In our discussion of rapture, we made a distinction between **prophecy** and **prediction**. Prophecy, an inspired word from God, contains both warning and promise—the Hebrew scriptures reveal that prophecy is not limited to prediction, and is, in fact, more often than not, a function of God's warning and promise. While *Revelation* contains precisely this kind of prophecy, what makes it so unique is that it falls into yet another category—the literary genre of **apocalypse**.

Understanding the literary genre of apocalypse is essential to understanding the presence of violent language and imagery in *Revelation*. In his excellent

commentary on *Revelation*, Eugene Boring shows how *Revelation* fits with other apocalyptic literature pieces that would have been familiar to readers of John's letters. Boring even lists some easily accessible apocalyptic documents from within 200 years of John's writing from the Island of Patmos.¹ We may be familiar with only two documents on the list—the book of *Daniel*, from the Hebrew scriptures, and *Revelation*—but first-century readers would have been very familiar with the type of writing that *Revelation* represents.

Utilizing violent imagery to reflect the current time more than a future time, apocalypses were common reading to the original audience of *Revelation*. Boring refers to apocalyptic writers as "pessimistic,"² but even the writers of apocalypses knew that their pessimism was not the final word. Apocalyptic writers believed the world had degenerated to such a state that the only way for God's justice to win out over the forces of chaos and evil was for God to intervene directly. If we weren't able to bring the wickedness of the world to an end, then God would end the world. One can see where this kind of perspective just might lead to high drama and life-threatening images.

Learning the Language

Consistent with this perspective, John used pictorial language, rather than propositional language, to send his message to the churches in his care.³ **Propositional language** is the kind of normal language we use to talk about the present reality in terms we can understand. Propositional language is logical and linear, and differentiates between myth and truth. For example, in the sentence "The clock strikes One/The mouse runs down," from *Mother Goose*, the images are specific and objective. This sentence is an example of propositional language.

Pictorial language, on the other hand, does *not* point us toward objective realities. It is more abstract. For example, in this poetic sentence, "But at my back I always hear/Time's winged chariot hurrying near,"

by Andrew Marvell, the images are not to be taken literally. Time is not actually taking the form of a chariot with wings.

Likewise, the pictorial language that John uses in *Revelation* is not meant to evoke a specific person or thing, but rather to create images that will resonate and impart truth rather than facts. This pictorial language is nonlogical and nonlinear. It makes little sense to try to read inferences into it.

Thus, we can approach the violence in *Revelation* as propositional language that describes specific objective realities in which images have meaning *only* if we can attach them to something logical. The other option is to view the violence portrayed in *Revelation* as pictorial language that does not paint a picture of reality. Understanding the way apocalyptic literature—and John—use language, makes the violence in *Revelation* less about *violence as reality to come* and more about *violence as a reflection of what is*.⁴

Snatching Peace from the Jaws of War

This violent imagery was purposeful, and the first readers of *Revelation* would have recognized it as a reflection of “what is,” of the violent injustice of the Roman Empire. We must recall that injustice was rampant for this audience, and the violent imagery and symbolism of *Revelation* would have let them know that God was well aware of their desperate situation, that God was not going to sit back uninvolved.

Likewise, John, inspired by God’s imparted vision, wanted to encourage the people to be involved in *witnessing against* injustice, as well. This did not mean that the readers should involve themselves in any sort of violent acts to address their injustice. Quite the contrary. In fact, Daniel Berrigan, a Catholic priest who was at the forefront of antiwar protests during the Vietnam War, has argued that we must *reclaim* the book of *Revelation* from those who would interpret it as condoning violence.⁵ Essential to reclaiming *Revelation*? An understanding that the violence in *Revelation* serves as a stark contrast to the nonviolent Lamb who was slain, yet still is victorious.

Let’s return to the scriptures to examine how this can be. The scrolls described in *Revelation 5* must be opened so that John can experience his apocalypse, but no one is worthy to open them. Then an announcement comes: the Lion of Judah is worthy. Yet, when this mighty and worthy Lion comes forth, it is a Lamb (*Rev. 5:5–6*). Thus, the scrolls show the world as it is, in all its violent, messy, death-infused wonder. As in any other good apocalypse, things are so bad, God must intervene. But rather than meeting a violent world with equally violent power, God’s secret weapon is a lamb—the Lamb who wins the war by being slaughtered, much as Aslan wins the war in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by allowing the White Witch to kill him.⁶

None of the violence in *Revelation* can defeat this Lamb. As the surrounding violence escalates, the nonviolent Lamb becomes even more powerful. The forces of evil and chaos that create and perpetuate violence are no match for the Lamb who was slain (*Rev. 5:11–13*).

The Power of Nonviolence

Much blood flows in *Revelation*, but John, and the seven churches in Asia Minor to whom he wrote, lived in a time when bloodshed was common, and brutality was the way to obtain and maintain peace. In contrast, the revelation John received and shared with them is this: *the power of the Lamb defeats the power of violence*.

In a nutshell, this is the story of Good Friday and Easter. When betrayed by his friend and arrested by the Roman authorities, Jesus neither fought back nor mounted a defense. He went to his death as a lamb went to the temple to become a sacrifice. But the violence of his death was defeated through the empty tomb of Easter morning, precisely because Jesus did *not* meet violence with violence. The contrast of the violence of the crucifixion and the manner in which Jesus went forth to his death is mirrored in *Revelation*. Its message is this: violence is not a weapon in the arsenal of the saints. In fact, we have no need of weapons at all, for the battle will be fought by the Lion of Judah—the Lion who is a slain Lamb.

Think it Through

1. Recall a time when you needed to defend yourself physically, emotionally, or intellectually. If it's not too painful, talk about it with someone who cares about you. What feelings does the phrase "like a lamb to the slaughter" stir up for you? Women are sometimes accused of confusing passive compliance with meekness. What do you think, and how does this relate to the understanding of Christ as the Lamb who was slain?
2. The pictorial language in *Revelation* works in poetic fashion rather than in straightforward propositional language. Do you enjoy reading poetry? Why or why not? Read *Revelation 10:1–10*. What emotion does the language evoke for you? Try writing the passage out as a poem; it doesn't have to rhyme.
3. The bloody battle described in *Revelation* is a lot like the battle in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* in which the White Witch is defeated and Aslan is restored. If you've read this children's book or seen the movie, list two ways in which these battles are the same and two ways in which they are different.
4. Epic battles between good and evil are popular and make exciting movies and novels. How do movies like *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Avatar* help or hurt our ability to read *Revelation* as an inspired word with both warning and promise?

Dig Deeper

Here are some suggestions for reading and reflection.

- Daniel Berrigan's article "War in Heaven, Peace on Earth," from the Dominicans' online journal, *Spirituality Today*; available at www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/884013berrigan.html.
- M. Eugene Boring's commentary on *Revelation* in the Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).

Notes

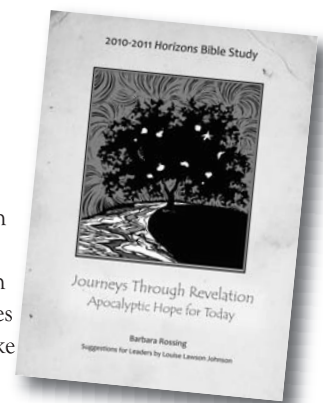
1. M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* in the Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).
2. Boring, 42.
3. Boring, 52.
4. For more information on the functions of pictorial and propositional language, see Eugene Boring's commentary on *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989).
5. Daniel Berrigan, "War in Heaven, Peace on Earth," *Spirituality Today*, a Dominican internet journal of spirituality; www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/884013berrigan.html.
6. First published in 1950 by Geoffrey Bles, United Kingdom; current editions include a paperback published by HarperCollins, New York, 2001.

Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today

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Lesson Four

A Vulnerable God

A Puzzling Paradox

Often, when we think of God, we think in terms of the omnipotent, mighty, all-powerful God who called creation into being, delivered the children of Israel from the clutches of the Egyptian army, led Joshua into “battle” at Jericho, and, in the person of Jesus and others, healed the sick and raised the dead. This traditional model of divine power works well within our culture, for our culture often values those who attain power and success. But the gospel proclaims that God is self-revealed in Jesus Christ—a person whose life, death, and resurrection are very different from the traditional model of divine omnipotence.¹ Our ultimate Christian hope is not based on divine omnipotence with only the aforementioned characteristics of power. Rather, God’s power is lodged in God’s willingness to become the antithesis of the traditional or “normal” definition of power.

As theologian Jürgen Moltmann says, our hope for the future, and God’s reign to come, is rightly located in Christ’s resurrection.² The kind of power reflected in the resurrection indeed is beyond our capacity to fully grasp. But before we even contemplate the victorious resurrection, we must first deal with the humiliation and suffering of Christ’s death on the cross. We also must consider what kind of power *this* is. Over the centuries, many thoughtful people have wrestled with the paradox of Jesus’ divinity and humanity. If Jesus is fully God *and* fully human, as the Nicene Creed states,³ how do we reconcile the thought of the immortal, all-powerful God dying on a symbol of human power—the cross?

This question was of great significance to the original audience of *Revelation*, living under the harsh boot of the Roman Empire, and is equally important to us. In a world where Jesus has come to claim victory over death and assert his reign, how can the terror and suffering of the world we experience be reconciled with the good news of the gospel and the reality of the world that is meant to be?

The Passion of Christ

Mark is probably the earliest of the four Gospels but, in some ways, contains fewer details. Jesus’ story begins with his baptism, which launches his public ministry. Even without a lot of details, the author of *Mark* does not spare us when it comes to the story of Jesus’ crucifixion and the events leading up to it. *Mark* shows us the reality of the suffering, and presents Jesus as the mute lamb who is slaughtered—a figure quite difficult to reconcile with traditional notions of power.⁴ As Jesus moves ever closer to Jerusalem and his fate, *Mark* gives us a picture of increasing suffering, which comes to a head at the garden of Gethsemane.⁵

The garden scene is a portent of what comes after Jesus’ arrest: his friends and followers are unable to see the depth of his suffering and stay awake with him (*Mk. 14:37*). How could Jesus then believe they wouldn’t abandon him when death was imminent? Yet Jesus does not waver from his task—a series of events often described as “the Passion of Christ;” he endures the suffering and humiliation heaped on him by Pilate, by Herod, by the Roman soldiers, by his own friends. And in enduring this suffering—this powerlessness—Jesus gives us a picture of God’s power that reflects the truths proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount and in parable after parable in which Jesus describes the realm of God.

Reigning in Power and Glory and Might

To understand how Jesus comes to this Passion point in his life, we must recall the many things Jesus said about power, along with the many actions he took that began to unravel people’s traditional notions of power. When he began his ministry, the people of Galilee were waiting for, in the words of Bruce Springsteen, a “savior to rise from these streets.”⁶ Living within the Roman Empire meant that they were taxed heavily and were under the constant threat of violence. By the time of Jesus, centuries had passed since the peaceful reigns of David and Solomon.

Captivity and exile, rebuilding and civil war, upheaval and discontent—all these things eventually led to conquest by Rome and life under the Pax Romana (“Roman Peace”). But the cost of Rome’s “peace” was life under the harsh reality of Roman rule.

Belief in a *messiah* who would deliver the people and restore them to the land promised to Abraham brought much hope to people during this time. This notion of a deliverer, a messiah, was not new to people of the first century. The prophets of the Hebrew scriptures had foretold the coming of a messiah and indicated that he would be a descendant of David (*Jer. 23:5*). He would be a great teacher and leader, pious and able to judge wisely, righteous (*Is. 11:2–5*), and one who would bring victory to Israel. For the Israelites, this victory was assumed to be military in nature, brought about by a great leader who would avenge earlier defeats and humiliations. The idea that this messiah would be self-sacrificing, humble, and one who would save the people from their sins (rather than from the current occupying empire), was never part of this tradition.

This explains why Jesus’ disciples never seemed to “get it” when he told them (over and over), “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed . . .” (*Lk. 9:22*). The prophets of the Hebrew scriptures had promised a deliverer who would be a king like David, a mighty warrior who ruled a united kingdom. For the people of Jesus’ day and long after, the days of David were remembered (rightly or wrongly, but definitely with great nostalgia) as a time when things were better—a time when Israel was a great nation that could have turned the tables on bullies like the Romans.

This promised king and savior would be powerful—the prophets and tradition seemed to guarantee this. Many of the people who followed Jesus did so because they thought they were following this promised leader (*Lk. 9:18–20*). But Jesus actually led them toward a confrontation that really was no confrontation at all—he knew what awaited him and he went willingly toward it.

William Placher says that the surprising revelation in John’s apocalypse—that the Lion of Judah is actually a Lamb (*Rev. 5:5–6*)—sends us a message that wherever the Hebrew scriptures read “lion,” we should read “lamb,” and wherever the New Testament refers to the victorious messiah, we should remember that this victory came on a cross.⁷ Though many were looking for a messiah wielding traditional forms of power, the true power of God, we ultimately learn, is found in the cross—and it is the power that comes from a willingness to sacrifice for others, even unto death.

The Trinitarian Dance

This kind of sacrificial and vulnerable power is yet difficult to understand, even with the example of Christ and his life, death, and resurrection! But an understanding of God, whose power comes through vulnerability actually is bound up in a Reformed understanding of the Trinity—the Triune God. Shirley Guthrie, a beloved Presbyterian theologian, has one of the best explanations of the Trinity—one that helps us understand both God’s nature, as well as this whole notion that God can actually be vulnerable. In his landmark book *Christian Doctrine*, Guthrie explains that the Trinity is not a hierarchical triangle, but, rather, a circle—three “persons” in a community that is one.⁸ Relationships require vulnerability, whether in our relationships with others or with God. God models this vulnerability in the Trinity because the Trinity is a community of persons in relationship, even as it is one. This community, or relationship, is what makes God what God is.

Because God is in relationship within Godself, God can be in relationship to us, thereby modeling for us the way we should be in relationship with each other. William Young’s best-selling novel *The Shack* portrays this interrelationship of God’s three persons as literally dancing in the kitchen of the shack of the book’s title.⁹

The image of God in three persons dancing in and out of view, but always present, has some relation to Guthrie’s interconnected circles. We were created specifically to be in relationship with God, and right

away in Eden, humans took advantage of that relationship and its inherent vulnerability. Despite this—and all our other failings—God has continued to relate to us and to model the kind of relationship we should have with each other. Jesus, in his teachings to the disciples on the road toward Jerusalem, tried to give them insight into this: he told them over and over that the greatest would have to become like the least (*Lk. 9:48*), the meek would inherit the earth (*Mt. 5:5*), the first would be last and the last first (*Mk. 10:31*), and to save one's life, one must lose it (*Mk. 8:35*). God models for us relationships that make us vulnerable, in which we are to put aside our pride and dignity, and lead by serving. Nowhere is this clearer than in the cross, where Jesus laid aside his pride, his dignity, his very life, for the sake of humanity and our relationship to God.

Power—Not What You Think

Recalling that God's power often is much more nuanced than traditional definitions of power—force, strength, military victory—we finally can come to recognize that the power of God is God's patient refusal to exert power over the world. Rather than coming to earth as a military or political leader, Jesus came as a teacher and preacher who preferred to spend his time with outcasts and ordinaries, rather than with those in the pillars of society.

The surprise—the Lion of Judah turning out to be a Lamb (*Rev. 5:5–6*)—should be no surprise to those of us who know the gospel. The Gospel of *Luke* recounts that, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem amid shouts of Hosanna and waving palms, Jesus wept, for he knew the people there did not recognize the things that made for peace (*Lk. 19:41–42*). John of Patmos, in writing to the churches of *Revelation*, wants to get the message to his readers that the things that Rome believes ensure peace—violence, war, power—are not what bring peace. The war machine of Rome is met by the Lion of Judah, who is . . . a Lamb.

And So . . .

When you read *Revelation*, it is important to keep in mind that the image of the **Lamb**, not the **Lion**, is the primary image of Christ, the victor. This is not just any lamb, but the Lamb who has been slaughtered (*Rev. 5:6*). The Roman emperors expected their subjects (who were truly subjected to them) to bow down; there were dire consequences for anyone who did not. But before Jesus, the worthy Lamb, the very heavenly hosts fall down in worship, singing a new song—not victory songs of war that have been heard over and over throughout the history of the earth—but songs of worship and praise. Songs of . . . the Lamb.

Think It Through

1. Think about the people you feel closest to in your life. In these relationships, we open ourselves not only to acceptance, security, and joy, but also to rejection, hurt, and pain. Why do you think this is? Who holds the power in your relationships (mother/infant; middle-aged daughter/aging parent; individual/community)? How do these relationships affect the way you understand the power of God?
2. God chooses to be in relationship with us. Does this make God vulnerable to rejection and pain? Try writing a mini-psalm about this. Look at Psalm 43:22–24 and Jeremiah 2:1–13 for inspiration.
3. In Revelation 5:5–6, John describes the one worthy to open the scroll as the Lion of Judah who is actually a Lamb. In Revelation 14:1, John describes the Lamb as standing on Mount Zion at the hour of judgment. How do these two descriptions of the Lamb differ? Can you resolve the differences? Why, or why not?
4. Roman emperors after Augustus referred to themselves as deities. Throughout history, monarchs in many countries have claimed a divine mandate to rule. How does this differ from Christ's mission and

ministry on earth? When we speak of the “rule” of Christ and his “kingdom,” do those words suggest images that are opposite to God’s vulnerability? Talk with a friend or pastor—someone you trust—about how you are coming to understand the nature of God’s power.

5. If there’s a zoo near you, take a child and go visit a lion and a lamb. Pay close attention to all three. What kind of power/vulnerability does each have? How does it speak to you of God’s power/vulnerability? Make a photo slide show with captions expressing your insights. Share it with your Bible study group.

Dig Deeper

Here are some suggestions for reading and reflection.

- Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).
- William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).
- Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1983).

Notes

1. William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 3.
2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1983), 5.
3. *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1993), 64.
4. David Neville, “God’s Presence and Power: Christology, Eschatology and ‘Theodicy’ in Mark’s Crucifixion Narrative,” in *Theodicy and Eschatology*, edited by Bruce Barber and David Neville (Hindmarsh, Australia: ATF, 2005), 21.
5. Neville, 22.
6. Bruce Springsteen, “Thunder Road” (song published in 1975).
7. William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 9.
8. Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine* revised edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 92.
9. William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2008), 145.

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