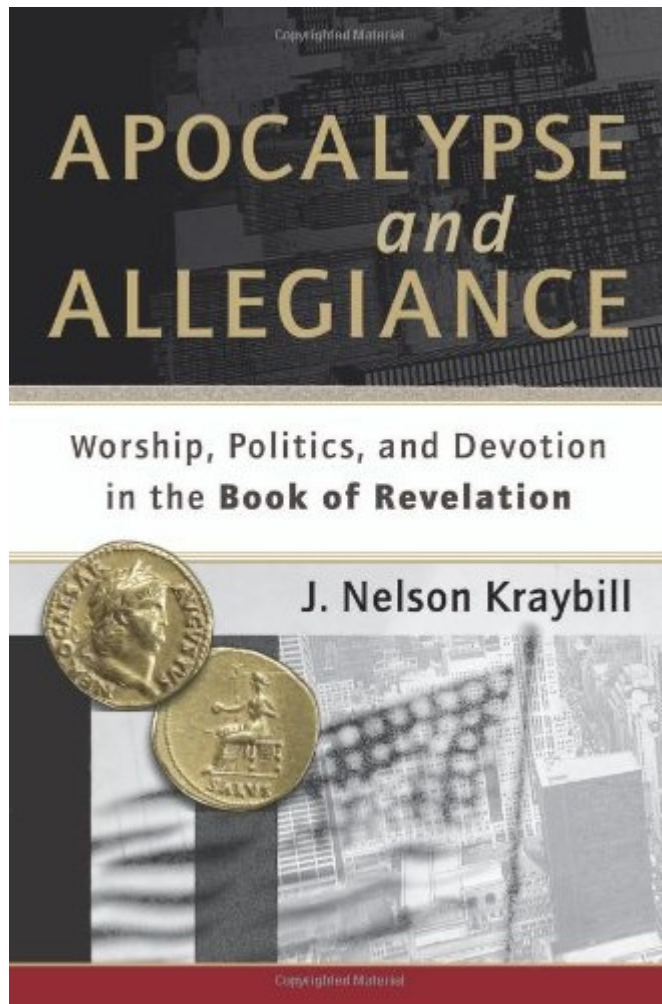


Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation

reviewed by [Michael J. Gorman](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## Apocalypse and Allegiance

J. Nelson Kraybill

Brazos

After taking my course on Revelation a few years ago, a young pastor from Africa claimed that the course was life-changing. Why? Because the theology of the Left Behind phenomenon, exported to Africa by Christians in the U.S., had his country in

its grip. But this pastor had found a new and exciting way to interpret the last book of the Bible.

Although the Left Behind series has not yet been left behind by all the Christian faithful, in my experience many are looking for more helpful ways to read Revelation as Christian scripture. Nelson Kraybill, the former president of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the Apocalypse and has been a teacher of Revelation for more than two decades in many different countries. In this book he has given us a challenging but accessible interpretation of Revelation as a summons to true worship and appropriate allegiance.

Kraybill's assessment of Revelation's message as a whole is insightful, though not unique among theological interpreters today: "John's vision presents a parallel reality [to the claims of the imperial cult], an alternative political allegiance, a counternarrative that stands over against the idolatrous expressions of emperor worship." What is distinctive about this book, however, is the way Kraybill makes first-century imperial realities come to life and then gently but consistently invites the reader to raise questions about and see analogous situations in our own context. In contrast to some critics of empire, Kraybill accomplishes this without coming across as self-righteous or condescending.

An overarching focus on worship and allegiance in the context of the imperial cult leads Kraybill to work through Revelation in an unusual order: after considering the opening vision in Revelation 1, he goes right to Revelation 12-13, devoting 40 pages to these chapters before attending to the worship of God and the Lamb in Revelation 4-5.

Kraybill wants to make sure that his readers understand Revelation not as a prediction of future events, but in its historical context, especially as a text that offers an alternative form of worship and allegiance. He does this by connecting every passage he discusses to its likely cultural referents (specific events, places, people and texts) and to the significance of Revelation's many symbols in light of those referents.

He also approaches the subject of empire and the imperial cult in a unique but very appropriate way: through images, which were a chief means of spreading and reinforcing the imperial cult in the first century. More than 80 photographs of sculptures, temple ruins and especially coins illustrate both the reality and the

ideology of the imperial cult. The emperor, these artifacts tell us, was an all-powerful ruler, savior, peacemaker and god who demanded and deserved complete devotion. John had the courage to unveil the very dark side of emperors and empire alike, and the vision to depict God and the Lamb as the rightful sovereign.

How does Kraybill make the transition to our own, Western Christian context? “While no Western nation has outright ruler worship today,” he writes, “we do have political, military, and economic powers to which millions give unquestioned allegiance. . . . The world he [John] inhabited—the Roman Empire—and the symbolic universe his vision created have uncanny parallels to our circumstances today.”

From those claims about the importance of allegiance and symbolism, Kraybill leads his reader to consider those “uncanny parallels” between John’s world and ours. Each chapter concludes with two features that are crucial to the book’s purpose. The first is a set of three reflection questions, many of which are quite provocative. For instance, he asks us to ponder, “What stories of victory does your society retell to shape national identity and pride? Are there national holidays that Christians should refuse to celebrate or should mark with alternative celebrations?” And: “How do tragedy, hardship, or poverty change the way people worship? What happens to worship when believers achieve security and status?”

The second interesting feature at the end of each chapter is a story of real-life Christians, from either the early or the modern church, who embodied the vision of the particular aspect of Christian allegiance discussed in that chapter. Featured in these “Living the Vision” pieces are a former military chaplain, members of a Christian Peacemaker Team in Palestine, several early Christian martyrs, anti apartheid activist Allan Boesak and other significant Christian witnesses to the countercultural and nonviolent practices that Kraybill finds appropriate for faithful readers of Revelation. These vignettes are one of the book’s great strengths. One of them rightly asks American Christians to contemplate the appropriateness of saying the Pledge of Allegiance.

The book does, however, have some limitations. Although Kraybill deals with all of Revelation, he does so out of sequence and with minimal attention to some parts, so the book will not serve as a traditional commentary for those preaching from Revelation. Further more, apart from his important attention to the fundamental questions of worship and allegiance, he generally does not go into depth about theological issues. This is a shame, because when Kraybill does focus on the

theological—on the subjects of violent imagery and of the New Jerusalem as the basis of Christian mission—the results are first-rate. The study questions and stories of faithful living make the book very useful for small groups, though I suspect that some readers will find the preoccupation with historical matters overwhelming at times—and occasionally only tangentially related to the topic at hand.

Despite these (relatively minor) limitations, *Apocalypse and Allegiance* is a book that raises questions and presents perspectives that all pastors, other leaders of Christian communities, and people in the pews need to wrestle with. In my own work on Revelation I too have been captured by the centrality of worship and allegiance to the book's message. We may have debates about where empire is or about whether and how a superpower constitutes an empire, but there can be little doubt that Revelation challenges the many isms and other idols that permeate Western culture. It also challenges the comfortable civil religion that still plagues most of our churches—that allows us to avoid the issues of allegiance, devotion and injustice that Kraybill brings to our attention.

Kraybill believes that Revelation may be able to “jolt us out of our slumber” about the world's Romelike injustices—a wonderful image. His entire book claims that Revelation can do the same with respect to our misplaced allegiances and our idols. May we have ears to hear what the Spirit and Kraybill are saying to the churches.