

## The “Open Door” of Heaven in the Book of Revelation

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The Book of Revelation provides significant glimpses into the reality of the Heavenly Sanctuary, especially in chapters 4-5. Like several OT texts, this vision affirms that the heaven sanctuary is where the action is truly at; the earthly temple served as a reflection of this sanctuary and even as an entry point to participation in the heavenly sanctuary. A central point of the vision of Ezekiel is the assurance that the heavenly sanctuary is real and will continue to exist even after the earthly temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, as it was by the Babylonians in 587 BC. The vision of Ezekiel assured those who would see their temple torn down by the Babylonians that God’s dwelling place continues in heaven and is accessible to God’s people, even when they are exiled from the promised land.<sup>1</sup> In a similar manner, the central vision of the Book of Revelation assures Jewish Christians who have been cut off from the synagogue and the Jerusalem temple that they still have access to the divine presence; thus, they participate in the most important worship, that which goes on in the heavenly sanctuary.

The following questions arise: Is not John the only one granted access to the heavenly sanctuary, and then only briefly? Is this sanctuary not an “up there thing” that we will not access until our death or the last day? The portion of Revelation that can help us with these questions is mention of “the door” chapters 3-4. The last two of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation mention an “open door” (3:8) and a “door” at which Christ stands and knocks so that it be opened (3:20). John then sees an “open door” in Heaven immediately prior to the vision of the heavenly throne room (4:1). This paper will demonstrate that all three of these “door” references emphasize accessibility to the heavenly sanctuary that is granted not only to John in the vision that follows, but to all of the baptized who participate in the Paschal feast of the Lamb in the context of the Divine Service on earth.

Let’s begin by reading these three texts:

3:8 Oida, sou ta erga( idou. dedwka enwpion sou quran hnewgmenhn( hj ourdeij dunatai kleisai authn( oti mikran eceij dunamin kai. ethrhhsaj mou ton logon kai. ouk hrnhsw to. onoma, mou [I know your works; behold, I have placed before you **a door** that has been opened, which no one is able to such, because you have little power and you kept my word and did not deny my name.]

3:20 idou. esthka epi. thn quran kai. krouw\ ean tij akoushj thj fwnhj mou kai. anoixhj thn quran( ikai\ eis eleusomai proj auton kai. deipnhsw met\ autou/ kai. autoj met\ emou [Behold, I stand at **the door** and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens **the door**, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.]

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<sup>1</sup> The Jewish priests who left the temple and settled at Qumran show in some of their writings, especially the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, an acute awareness of their participation in the heavenly sanctuary even as they are cut off from the Jerusalem temple; see Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (AGJU 42; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 173-175.

4:1 Meta. tauta eidon( kai. idou. qura hnew/gmenh en tw/ ouranw( kai. h' fwnh. h' prwth hj hkousa wj sal piggoj lal oushj metV emou/ legwn( VAnaba wde( kai. deixw soi a| dei/ genesqai meta. tauta<sup>1</sup> [After these things I looked, and, behold, **a door** that has been opened in heaven, and the first voice that I heard as a trumpet was speaking to me, saying, “Come up here, and I will show you what will necessarily happen after these things.”]

Louis Brighton, in his recent *Concordia Commentary* on Revelation, explains these texts in a manner that does not show any relationship between these three uses of qura, which are usually all translated “door”.<sup>2</sup> Since Brighton’s fine commentary is now being used by LCMS pastors and will be for years to come, I will quote him at length on these “door” texts before offering my own corrective of his exegesis.

Concerning Rev 3:8, Brighton writes:

The “opened door” (3:8) represents opportunities for bringing the message of Christ’s victory to others. The Lord Christ has opened such doors of opportunity for Christians of Philadelphia. He then expected his people to enter and exploit these opportune seasons. The Lord Christ expects his people to carry out the mission of the church, the proclamation of the Gospel, at all times—whether convenient or not (2 Tim 4:2). But especially does the exalted Christ expect his church to take full advantage of golden opportunities which he himself has taken special measures to provide.<sup>3</sup>

Although all that Brighton says about the importance of missions is obviously true from the rest of Scripture, is that really what Jesus is talking about here? Brighton is convinced, as are several other commentators, that “door” is being used in the same manner as in Paul; he even cites 1 Cor 16:8-9, 2 Cor 12:12, and Col 4:3 as evidence. I will soon show that the immediate context, especially the use of “door” in 4:1, does not support such the conclusion that Jesus is using “door” here as a metaphor for mission opportunity.

Brighton states that Christ is using a different understanding of “door” a few verses later in the letter to Laodicea (3:20):

The Lord is serious when he calls his people to come in repentance to his Gospel; he will go out of his way to do so. He seeks the lost; he comes to the very door of the heart and knocks for entrance. The picture of Jesus at the door is used in Matthew as a reference to the nearness of the end (Mt 24:33). It is used in James 5:9 for the Lord who stands at the door as a judge (cf. Lk 12:36). But in Rev 3:20 the Lord is a friend who stands at the door and knocks, for he wishes to enter in order to dine with his people (cf. Jn 6:53-58). The one who hears and knows the voice will open the door to welcome his Savior and Lord (Jn 10:1-5; 14:23). Such a hearing of the voice of the Lord and such an answering of the knock are worked by the Holy Spirit, for only the Spirit can open the ear to hear and move the heart to respond (Rom 10:17; 1 Cor 12:3).<sup>4</sup>

Brighton understands “the door” mentioned here as a metaphor for Christ’s entry to the heart or life of a repentant believer. Here he follows the popular and relatively modern focus on the heart as the dwelling place of Jesus in the life of the Christian. But Jesus talks about dining once he gains entry; the metaphors of *entry into our heart* and *dining*

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Brighton, *Revelation* (Concordia Commentary; St. Louis: CPH, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> *Revelation*, 92.

<sup>4</sup> *Revelation*, 102.

*with us* do not fit together well. It may be said that Christ enters our lives or heart to dwell there, but not to eat with us and we with him.

Brighton understands Christ using a third and distinct use of “door” only one verse later, in 4:1:

Here in Rev 4:1 the opened *qurā* represents the idea that John was given the special grace of looking into heaven, which is ordinarily closed and forbidden to human eye, to view the heavenly glory of God. The opened door thus signifies a particular divine revelation.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize, Brighton sees the occurrence in 3:8 as a metaphor for mission opportunity, the two occurrences in 3:20 as a metaphor for the heart of Christians in need of repentance, and 4:1 as a metaphor for the entry point of divine revelation given to only a few.

Although I disagree with his interpretations of 3:8 and 3:20, Brighton is certainly correct on 4:1.<sup>6</sup> A ladder, a gate, or an opening, are words used to describe an entry point into God’s presence, or his heavenly sanctuary, in biblical and extra-biblical literature. See, for example, these texts:

[Gen 28: 12, 17] And he dreamed that there was a **ladder** set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven [. . .]. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the **gate of heaven**.

[1 Enoch 14:15] And behold there was **an opening** before me and a second house which is greater than the former and everything was built with tongues of fire.

[TLevi 5:1] At this moment the angel opened for me **the gates of heaven** and I saw the Holy Most High sitting on the throne.

But what about the specific word “door”, where do we find this word used elsewhere for the entry point to the heavenly sanctuary? This usage can be understood by looking at the frequent use of *qurā* as the word used in the Septuagint for the door to Israel’s tabernacle and then their temple. For example, God instructs Moses in this manner: “And you shall make a screen for **the door of the tabernacle**, of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework” (Exodus 26:36). It makes sense: The tabernacle reflects the heavenly sanctuary; if the earthly sanctuary is entered through a *qurā*, then the heavenly sanctuary also has a *qurā* as its entry point.

The use of door in 4:1 as the entry point to the heavenly sanctuary is indisputable. My proposal, as stated above, is rather simple: We should interpret the earlier references to “door” in the two letters of chapter 3 in light of their wider context, namely the door to heaven in 4:1. Furthermore, I will now demonstrate that this understanding of door as “the entry point to the heavenly sanctuary” fits well into the immediate context of both of the letters that mention a door.

The Letter to the church at Philadelphia begins with this title of Christ: “the one who has the key of David, the one who opens and on one can close and closes and no one

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<sup>5</sup> *Revelation*, 110-111.

<sup>6</sup> My only suggested change to his exegesis is his emphasis that only a few people in history have entered or viewed the heavenly sanctuary (e.g., Isaiah and Ezekiel). Although only a few have physically seen what John did, I will argue below that the faithful of God enter and experience the heavenly sanctuary that John saw.

opens” (3:7). Brighton is correct when he notes that Jesus is drawing on the language of Is. 22:22 where YHWH directs his words to Shebna, chief steward of Hezekiah, who management role of the king’s house, symbolized by the “key of David”, will be replaced by Eliakim. Brighton states:

Jesus uses the words of Isaiah to proclaim that he is over the household of God, and that he alone has the authority to control entrance into it[ . . . ]. The key of David symbolizes his authority now by which he has opened to all people the door of his Father's Kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

I could not agree more. The “key”, “opening”, and “shutting” imagery of verse 7, however, has an obvious relationship with the mention of the “door” that immediately follows in verse 8: “I have placed before you **an open door** which no one can **shut**.” Furthermore, one of the significant problems that the congregation in Philadelphia was facing was the Jewish synagogue. Listen to 3:9, “Behold, I am going to hand over those of the synagogue of Satan who call themselves Jews and are not, but rather they lie.” One of the lies of Jews about their Jewish brothers who worshipped Jesus is the accusation that they had abandoned YHWH and no longer had access to him. To this lie Jesus says: “you have an open door to the kingdom before you.” Finally, listen to the promise Christ gives to this church at the end of this letter: “I will place him as a pillar in the temple of my God and he will never again go outside” (3:12). The one who is faithful will not only have access to the heavenly sanctuary for eternity, but he will become a vital part, “a pillar”, of that sanctuary in which God dwells for eternity. He will never have to go out, but will remain in the presence of God for eternity. Therefore, both in 4:1 and the immediate context, this text is speaking about the fact that Christ is giving this congregation access to heaven in the midst of their struggles: the door is open to them and no one will close it. This interpretation, although not widespread, is by no means new. Early last century Wilhelm Bousset, the famous German scholar, identified this door as the entrance of the community to participation in the Messianic feast.<sup>8</sup> Pierre Prigent in his recent commentary cites several other commentators supporting the conclusion that this is “the door to the Kingdom, the door of the heavenly Jerusalem that is offered to Christians.”<sup>9</sup>

The typical interpretation of the second text, like that of Brighton, emphasizes that Jesus is standing at the door of our hearts, calling sinners to repentance; people must only open their hearts to him so that he can enter.<sup>10</sup> Such an interpretation ignores the context and also the meal imagery. If this text is interpreted in its immediate context, however, there is a door and a voice described only two verses later: the door to heaven and the voice of the Spirit who calls John to come into the Divine Presence. This text, moreover, echoes Song of Songs 5:2, where the bride states: “the voice of my beloved, he knocks at the door: Open to me, my beloved.” Jews of the first century interpreted this book allegorically; the bride was Israel and the groom was YHWH, even the Messiah.<sup>11</sup> Christ uses this marriage imagery and language from Song of Songs to present himself as

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<sup>7</sup> *Revelation*, 91-92.

<sup>8</sup> In *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (1906) as noted by R. H. Charles, *Revelation* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920) I.87.

<sup>9</sup> *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 203.

<sup>10</sup> For example, R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935) 164.

<sup>11</sup> See Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 218-219.

the groom, seeking marital union with his bride, the church, specifically the church at Laodicea. This certainly fits with the wider context of Revelation 19-22 where the New Jerusalem, the Church, is presented as the Bride of Christ and the last Day as the greatest of marriage celebrations. And what of the eating imagery? In the context of Revelation 3:20, Jesus is obviously calling this congregation to repentance and to a restoration of marital union, the intimate union that is most powerfully accomplished in the Eucharist, the marriage feast of the lamb.<sup>12</sup> This door, therefore, is not to one's heart, but to the heavenly sanctuary that is accessed here on earth in the eucharistic meal. This question, however, might arise: Why is the door to this sanctuary *open* in 3:8 and 4:1, but here he is knocking at a door that is *closed*? The context is a wealthy, lukewarm congregation rebuked by Christ that needs to repent and re-enter the gracious presence of God. The door is not locked to them; they had previously entered Christ's open door and feasted in his presence, but have left that presence. Now he invites them to enter again so that he can dine with them again at his eucharistic table.

The third text, Rev 4:1, is the clearest of the three references to the door. Here there is no doubt that the door is a metaphor for entry into the heavenly sanctuary, for John passes through the open door and behold the mystery of the heavenly sanctuary with the divine throne at the center. Before we discuss this experience of John in the heavenly sanctuary, however, let us circle back to a question I asked much earlier. Does the Book of Revelation present John as the only person on earth who enters this heavenly sanctuary and experiences the divine presence?

Some scholars have drawn attention to how the reading of Revelation allows the hearers to have an experience that parallels John's.<sup>13</sup> There is validity for this assertion in terms of experiencing all the scenes of Revelation. There is a very real and significant way in which the hearers of this vision enter the heavenly sanctuary and see the divine throne with John and hear the victory celebration of the lamb with John. Therefore, the reading of the vision itself can be seen as the door by which we too enter this sanctuary.

The experience of the Divine Presence, however, does not appear to solely, nor primarily, result from the reading of the book of Revelation. It is not insignificant that John had this experience on the Lord's Day, the typical day for Christians to gather for worship that included the Eucharist.<sup>14</sup> The understanding that other faithful Christians could pass through the "open door" of heaven in the context of Lord's Day worship appears to be the basis for the two invitations of Christ to the churches in Philadelphia and Laodicea that we have discussed. Furthermore, the Book of Revelation calls those who have been washed and clothed in white through the water and sealing with the Divine Name in Baptism "a kingdom and **priests** to our God **who reign on earth**" (Rev

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<sup>12</sup> See esp. Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 219-220.

<sup>13</sup> David Aune speaks of "actualizing" the experience of the vision; see "The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre", *Semeia* 36 (1986) 65-96. Leonard Thompson emphasizes that the use of this book in worship enabled the congregation to experience the eschatological deliverance in the here and now; see *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 53-73.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Bauckham, "The Lord's Day", *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (ed. D.A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 197-220.

5.10).<sup>15</sup> Christians on earth, therefore, are presented as priests who have access to the heavenly sanctuary.

Therefore, Revelation 4-5 and the other scenes of worship that follow are visual depictions of the hidden-to-the-naked-eye heavenly worship that the church participates in each Lord's Day as the church on earth. These chapters are not only depicting a past or future reality, they are showing forth a present reality for John and the church of his day. As such, they serve as a vivid commentary on what is happening in worship, especially in the Eucharist, where the Paschal Lamb who shed his blood and gave his body is present sharing his victory through this meal. It is no coincidence that Christ as the having-been-slaughtered-and-now-standing lamb is the focus of worship in the heavenly sanctuary according to Revelation, not Christ as the glorified "one like a son of man" who is seen in other scenes of Revelation. A congregation who listened to this apocalypse from start to finish is reminded that the heavenly sanctuary is neither a distant "up there" reality nor a future reality "far down the road" of time: it is an accessible and present reality that the baptized on earth enter and mysteriously and truly experience now in worship, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, Christians are invited to experience of the Divine Presence: the door to heaven is open as Christ, the paschal lamb, comes to eat with them by giving them his own flesh and blood for a blessed feast. The liturgy of Divine Presence found in Revelation 4-5, especially the use of the song of the seraphim from Isaiah 6, may have already been used by Jewish Christians for the eucharistic liturgy and would have helped hearers see the relationship between John's Lord's Day entry into the heavenly sanctuary and their entry into the heavenly sanctuary during eucharistic worship each Lord's Day.<sup>16</sup>

Through his vision John physically saw a part of reality few ever see this side of heaven. Through his book, we, too, go through the open door and see this heavenly reality. But even more importantly, through the Divine Service each Lord's Day we share in the very experience of the Divine Presence and enter the open door of the heavenly sanctuary as we lift up our hearts, sing with angels and archangels "Holy,Holy,Holy", bow down before the Lamb, and feast on his very body and blood.

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<sup>15</sup> Heb 10:19-23 also depicts baptism as the rite that prepares one to enter the heavenly sanctuary. Margaret Barker identifies the Name and clothing on the saints in Revelation with the Divine Name and clothing of the High Priest; see *On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 71. For the further discussion of the priestly background for early baptismal rites, see also C. A. Gieschen, "Sacramental Theology in the Book of Revelation" (unpublished paper).

<sup>16</sup> See Massey H. Shepherd Jr., *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960) 92-97.