

Patching up the text (Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21)

The reading from Revelation skips over lines that will likely put off many hearers.

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Children read the strangest things.

Somehow I recall reading a list of outdated laws during my childhood. Whether I found it in one of those curiosity books that fascinate kids or perhaps encountered it on a Dixie cup, I do not know. I recall two such laws. A Maryland law forbade cruelty to lobsters. And an Alabama provision outlawed trading horses after sundown.

Having grown up in Alabama, I've always been curious about that horse trading law. It emerged for obvious reasons: in bad light, a smart but unprincipled horse trader could patch up any old nag and sell it above its proper value. The law remains in effect. It forbids selling or buying "any domestic animal or domestic fowl between the hours of sunset and sunrise." Violate this law, and one is liable to "hard labor for the county" for no more than one year.

The book of Revelation does not need to be patched up, but the lectionary reading for this Sunday does something very like it. The reading skips over lines that will likely put off many hearers. "Outside are the dogs . . ." Cut. Warnings to those who add to or detract from Revelation's message? Silenced. Instead we hear that Jesus is coming soon to bless his followers and that "everyone" who hears the message and wishes to drink from the water of life is invited. We hear the beautiful news and skip over the hard stuff.

The Consultation on Common Texts [has published](#) the reasoning behind its selections, but I would encourage readers of Revelation to ponder how the book weaves notes of inclusion and exclusion into a single fabric. Our passage excludes transgressors from the Holy City, but it also extends an invitation—“Come!”—to everyone who is thirsty. The broader context of Revelation’s closing chapters imagines a lake of fire that receives every person whose name is missing from the Book of Life (20:15) but also a tree that bears fruit “for the healing of the nations” (22:2). Revelation shows the nations and kings being annihilated during the final battle (19:15, 19), but in the New Jerusalem the nations walk by its illumination and their kings bring their “glory” into the city (21:24-26).

At many points it is all but impossible to sort Revelation’s logic. Timelines don’t add up, symbols defy the imagination, and mixed signals multiply. We should probably struggle with these details a little.

But the question of inclusion and exclusion will always elude us, as it should. We are not God. We have no right to assign our neighbors to one category or another. The closing of Revelation calls us to hope, and it warns us against straying from the path. That is what we need to know.